

BEYOND THE CONSENSUS OF INCOMPATIBILITY:
FRANCOPHONE POETRY AND THE QUESTION OF THE POLITICAL

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This dissertation discusses the problems that emerge when poetic language is essentialized, when it is treated as entirely separate from other linguistic or social practices or as uniquely capable of revealing a certain kind of truth, political or otherwise. I show that key twentieth century theorists of both literary autonomy and literary engagement *agree* that poetic language and political action are incompatible. I examine the ways in which this “consensus of incompatibility” persists in the works of philosophers such as Theodor Adorno and Jacques Rancière, who, on the surface, seem to champion a crucial politics of the aesthetic. By contrast, I argue that poetic works point toward the limits of autonomy just as much as they also extend beyond any ideological or moral position, and beyond politics. In this light, my work examines a multiplicity of relationships between poetic language and the sociopolitical, focusing especially on postcolonial thought and Francophone literature. I propose multidimensional readings of Aimé Césaire, René Depestre, Michèle Lalonde and Gaston Miron that highlight the political context, thought and action of poetic works and their poeticity. Along the way, I create novel theoretical and intertextual dialogues, juxtaposing Jacques

Rancière and Homi Bhabha, reading Lalonde together with 1960s American television and billboard ads, Depestre along with Langston Hughes, and Miron in parallel with lyrical passages of Frantz Fanon.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Ioana was born five years before the Berlin Wall fell. She was born on the other side, and has only a few memories of those years before her family immigrated to the United States. The concrete high-rises, the courtyard—a stage for the most extraordinary adventures, the market, the classroom, Bistra... Most of her memories are imaginary, however—literary, poetic and musical.

Growing up in Los Angeles, Ioana excelled in math and science classes and oriented herself toward becoming a physician. She attended Cornell University for her bachelor's degree, majoring in both Biology and French. Immediately fascinated by animal behavior, Ioana became involved in several research projects, including studies in *Amazona albifrons* communication patterns and house finch reproductive strategies. In her free time, Ioana returned to trying to land a double axel, joining Cornell's Intercollegiate Figure Skating Team. Cornell placed 1st at the 2003 U.S. Championships that year—a very exciting moment—but Ioana had to quit shortly afterwards due to a back injury. After several inspiring literature and philosophy courses that she took during her semester abroad in Paris and at Cornell, Ioana decided to pursue graduate studies in French, and completed an Honor's thesis on René Maran's *Batouala*.

Ioana remained at Cornell as a graduate student in Romance Studies. Her research has focused primarily on 19th and 20th century French and

Francophone literatures, thought on the relationships between politics and aesthetics, and the developing dialogue between French and postcolonial theory. She has served as a Graduate Resident Fellow at Alice Cook House and has helped organize two Graduate Student Conferences. Ioana spent a year as *pensionnaire étrangère* at the École normale supérieure-Ulm and a summer at the Dartmouth Institute of French Cultural Studies, before joining her husband, Vlad, in Delft. This summer, they will be embarking on another adventure, bound for their new academic home at the University of Minnesota in the Twin Cities.

À l'avenir,

together

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|---|-----|
| INTRODUCTION..... | 1 |
| CHAPTER 1 | |
| RETHINKING THE POLITICS OF POETRY | 12 |
| 1.1 – The Consensus of Incompatibility | 13 |
| 1.2—The “Social Essence” of Art in Theodor Adorno | 25 |
| 1.3 – Misunderstanding: Jacques Rancière’s “Politics of Literature” | 37 |
| 1.4 – Displacing the Discussion | 54 |
| CHAPTER 2 | |
| POETRY AND COMMUNITY | 64 |
| 2.1—Literature and Political Community | 67 |
| 2.2—Negotiating Negritude’s Poetic Values: | 75 |
| Aimé Césaire’s “Réponse à Depestre” | 75 |
| 2.3—Poetic Performance as Political Event: Québec’s First <i>Nuit de la poésie</i> | 95 |
| CHAPTER 3 | |
| DIFFRACTING AN “ <i>OEUVRE-VIE</i> ”: | |
| READINGS OF RENÉ DEPESTRE | 122 |
| 3.1—Tissages..... | 126 |
| 3.1.1—The Political at the Heart of the Intimate in <i>Gerbe de sang</i> | 127 |
| 3.1.2—Reading <i>Étincelles</i> : Depestre’s Poetics of Subjectification | 135 |
| 3.2—The <i>Rainbow</i> ’s Poetics of Revolt | 148 |
| 3.3—Politics of the Masculine Voice | 168 |
| CHAPTER 4 | |
| AGONIQUE..... | 188 |
| Part I: Portrait of an Illness | 191 |
| 4.1.1—“Note d’un homme d’ici” | 191 |
| 4.1.2—“L’homme rapaillé” | 202 |
| 4.1.3—Death Poems | 213 |
| Part II: Poetry’s Insurrection | 228 |
| 4.2.1—“Aliénation délirante” | 228 |
| 4.2.2—“Notes sur le non-poème et le poème” | 240 |
| 4.2.3—“Séquences” | 246 |
| CONCLUSION | 263 |
| APPENDIX..... | 267 |
| WORKS CITED | 270 |

INTRODUCTION

The question of the relationships between poetry and politics is at least as ancient as the famous quarrel between philosophy and poetry, itself a matter of their social legitimation and their roles in political life (Plato, 607B). From the beginning of a certain Western philosophical tradition, poetry and politics were thought together. Whether as a source of deception and disorder, or as a channel for maintaining harmony, poetic language and performance was assumed to have ethical implications in “real life.” Today, such an assumption can hardly be taken for granted, although the ways of thinking the relations or oppositions between poetry (and more generally the arts) and the political sphere vary profoundly with and within any given culture. In this dissertation, I will primarily examine a certain French tradition, one that inherits its conceptions of art and politics from the Romantic era as well as from Marxist thought. I will confront these conceptions with Francophone works that rely on, transform or question these foundations.

Between 1789 and 1914, France saw no less than ten different regimes, not to mention the revolutions, rebellions, insurrections, coups, foreign interventions and invasions that accompanied them. Alongside this extreme governmental instability were equally tumultuous changes affecting social institutions, economic relations, urban development, scientific and technological advancement, as well as religious, intellectual and artistic life. Anne E. Berger reminds us that this was the “temps sans précédent de la

‘misère’ et du marché,” defined by increasingly visible poverty and a paradoxical individual isolation even in the midst of the emergence of the *masses*, that is, as human relations took increasingly artificial and commercial forms (“period without precedent of destitution and market relations”; *Scènes d’aumône* 11).¹

The important transformations that took place in the modern conception of art, and especially poetry, must be understood in relation to the progress and failings of this period, which were by no means experienced only in France. Berger explains that the 19th century is “le début de la ‘professionnalisation’ des belles-lettres, du commerce du livre à échelle industrielle, bref, de la confrontation de la littérature aux lois du marché” (“the beginning of the ‘professionalization’ of the *belles lettres*, of the book trade on an industrial scale, in short, of literature’s confrontation with the laws of the marketplace”; 239). The poetic genre reacted to these circumstances in several, interrelated ways.

First, through its historical ties, as well as aesthetic and affective parallels with the Christian Verb, it took on a kind of “charitable” responsibility towards society (44-46). Poetry intervened in the sociopolitical and moral debates of the age, including through the figures of prominent poet-politicians. In this way it participated in the larger “socialization” affecting literature as a whole through a continuation of the tradition of the *Lumières*.

Secondly, it began to develop what Berger calls a “conscience de classe

¹ All translations in this dissertation are my own unless otherwise noted.

poétique" ("poetic class consciousness"; 54). Through their dependence on the market for subsistence, poets were now drawn into a sort of intellectual and spiritual commerce, one that was far from lucrative, and which was often perceived as degrading. Concurrently, poets affirmed their fascination for and affinity with society's marginalized figures: the pauper, the Bohemian, the prostitute, etc. Berger suggests that this type of identification permitted the transformation of an increasing economic exclusion in the second half of the century into a voluntary posture of refusal.

Finally, this way of being "hors du monde" corresponds to poetry's proliferating presentations of itself as (intrinsically) exceptional and subversive ("outside of the world"; 54). Its partial exclusion from the logic of the market was turned into a strategy: poetry now symbolically interrupted the authority of commerce over human activities and production, and questioned its monopoly of worth and value. Thematically and formally, poetry challenged the logic of exchange. The cult of Beauty, the reactivation of the prophetic, the claim to ontological revelation, as well as the abandonment of traditional structures of rhyme, meter and verse, and the movement away from the supposedly transparent referentiality and syntactic structures of common language—all of these were in part ways of creating something of inestimable value.

This strategy of separation from the world can also be seen as an element of a specific process of re-sacralization of Art (poetry usually being its ideal manifestation) that began with German Romanticism. According to

Jean-Marie Schaeffer, in addition to being a form of resistance to the growing commercialization of life, this process consisted in a conservative, nostalgic response to the disorientation and “crisis in worldview—and particularly in dogmatic theology and metaphysics—brought on by the Enlightenment” (96). Art, especially poetry, began to serve a compensatory spiritual and philosophical function in opposition to a disenchanted and disappointing reality:

It is as if the loss of [poetry and Art’s] traditional functional legitimations (religious, didactic, ethical) had created a void into which philosophy fell, philosophy being itself in crisis as a result of the failure of rationalist theodicies and in search of a new legitimacy. Thus begins the long history of a reciprocal fascination, comforted by the rejection of a supposedly common enemy: prosaic reality in all its many hideous guises. (12)

Poetry thus claimed the role of seeing and hearing beyond the immediate world and revealing the Beautiful, the True, or the Unknown (Berger 47; Schaeffer 84-87). It did so by virtue of the supposed specificity of its linguistic form: because such notions were now recognized as inaccessible through conceptual language, poetic language’s indeterminateness was seen as the only adequate medium to reach and convey them. This led philosophy to embrace poetry and poeticity in a variety of ways, but it also meant that poetry became philosophical. Even as its autonomy and self-referentiality were proclaimed, valorized and theorized, Schaeffer shows that these were still caught up in a *compensatory* orientation toward “[replacing] a defective philosophical discourse” with its own ontological presentations (69).

This was a *fundamental* change in art’s (self-)legitimation, and

according to Schaeffer, “in more or less bastardized forms, the sacralization of poetry and Art has largely permeated most of modern artistic and literary life, and has constituted the Western art world’s aesthetic horizon of expectations, as it were, for nearly two centuries” (12). Schaeffer refers to this dominant conception as the “speculative theory of Art,” since it posits an unverifiable *essence* of Art—including autotelism as well as total politicization—that (authentic) individual works are merely called on to enact.

It is hardly surprising, then, that the possibilities for thinking the relationships between poetry and politics were also impacted. Thought on the politics of aesthetics has first and foremost taken the form of non-relation, maintaining that aesthetic creation is completely independent of anything that is “exterior” or “heterogeneous” to it.² This “art for art’s sake” tenet traversed the 20th century as the assumption of an *incompatibility* between poetry and various manifestations of the political. It was, at times, even endorsed by key proponents of engaged literature, who otherwise advocated a political program for prose, as I discuss in Chapter 1. Paradoxically, the “speculative theory of Art” can also be the source of various forms of sweeping politicization. These may be relatively subtle—the idea that art is politically subversive because it is functionless in a functional society, that its asocial existence makes it complicit

² Schaeffer convincingly argues that much of the usage of artistic “autonomy” is a misunderstanding or willful rejection of what Kant had theorized as a disinterested aesthetic *appreciation* of a work. That is, the art for art’s sake position applies to the artistic *object* (as such, and every one) what Kant had theorized with respect to an aesthetic *relation* between a specific object and an individual, independent of the object’s function(s). By turning autotelism into a defining characteristic of the object, of all objects of the category Art, this view in principle robs the observer of the possibility of considering the object from other perspectives, something that is not the case in Kant.

with humanity's worst horrors, that poetic indeterminateness is an incarnation of the essence of democracy—or they may be of the more direct kind, for example socialist realism's belief that Art can offer privileged access to socioeconomic truths.

What all of these forms have in common, then, is a belief in some *essence* of Art and its associated “ecstatic cognitive power” (Schaeffer 276). Art's sacralization implies that it is set apart or opposed to other spheres of human activity. For instance, poetry³ can be (antagonistically) separated from prose, common speech or conceptual discourse. What is a difference of degree, usage, attention or reception is then presented as a fundamental difference or impassable divide. This explains in part why the question of aesthetics and politics has so often been posed in terms of polemic dichotomies: eternal glory versus the urgency of the here and now; gratuitous excess versus profitable conformism; autonomy versus sacrifice of aesthetic ideals; asocial refusal versus authorial responsibility; authenticity versus proselytism; absolute freedom versus ideological servitude, etc.

Thought on the relationships between poetry and politics is clearly polarized. This leads to Laurent Dubreuil's important question in *Refus de la politique*: “Il reste à comprendre pourquoi ces deux conceptions coexistent, pourquoi il est si facile de démontrer que le littéraire échappe à une identification absolue, ou que la littérature est toujours une réalisation

³ The separation can also target poetic language, poeticity, literary language, literature, the literary, etc.—the goal is the same: protecting some part of the ‘art of writing’ from contamination through intercourse with the ordinary.

politique” (“It remains to be understood why these two conceptions coexist, why it is so easy to demonstrate that the literary eludes absolute identification, or that literature is always a political production”; 52). There can be an infinite variety of reasons for the tendency to gravitate towards one position or the other: the appeal of dualism; the appeal of polemics; the appeal of a romantic or Marxist heritage; gregarious instinct; cults of personality; obedience to authority or tradition; conscious, strategic, or unconscious limitations in research design; structural limitations of the field, and so on. The point is that, regardless of which position one chooses, it is “easy to demonstrate” because one always finds what one is looking for. Each is merely reflecting a *partial* perspective (in both senses of the term) and inevitably fails to account for what are actually extremely complex, multi-layered and intertwined relationships that are to a large extent specific to individual works. Furthermore, the overt or implied descriptions of Art’s intrinsic politics or autonomy are always also arguments *for* these characteristics, that is, they are prescriptive, or as Schaeffer puts it, “persuasive” or “evaluative” definitions (285).

[Art] is not an object endowed with an internal essence; like every other intentional object it is (becomes) what people make of it—and they make the most diverse things of it. [...] It goes without saying that the definitions of art [...] are not what they claim to be; they present themselves in a descriptive grammatical form, that of the definition of an essence; but since art has no essence [...] they are in fact evaluative definitions (the art works are identified as art works insofar as they conform to a specific artistic ideal—that of the alleged definition of essence). (6-7)

Any supposed autotelic or political essence of art or poetry, then, has little to do with the character of these practices as a whole, and even less with

that of individual works or poems. Rather, it can be viewed as a historical construction within the tradition of the “speculative theory of Art.” Dubreuil, like Schaeffer, criticizes aesthetic essentialism and insists on paying attention to the empirical existence of individual artworks. He further insists on maintaining a distinction between the arts, writing that “on commence à parler de *l’art*, et l’on arase les différences entre les arts, entre les œuvres” (“we start speaking of *art*, and we level differences between the arts, between works”; 54). For these reasons, in the pages that follow I do not make any general claims about poetry and politics, and I focus instead on individual works, authors and movements.

What I hope will emerge from these discussions is not *a* politics of literature, but rather a multiplicity of ways in which works rely on, make visible or enact politics. I use the term politics in its largest sense from its institutional incarnations to its manifestations in day to day behaviors and decisions, as well as relations of class, race and gender. I do not assume that politics is always orderly or rational. Because I agree with Schaeffer’s conclusion that “the sacralization of the arts has been no more than a local convention and not humanity’s final word regarding aesthetics and the arts,” I have turned to Francophone works written by activist poets during periods of turmoil, a body of work that both ‘provincializes’ European thought and makes the limitations of separating aesthetics from politics quite obvious (308). This is not to say that these works do not also exhibit apolitical dimensions, which I will also discuss, but it will not be my focus.

Postcolonial works have rarely been perceived as essential to the elaboration of knowledge outside their own field. Francophone authors have thus been largely excluded from the French debate between autonomy and engagement, despite the fact that they show a persistent concern for the relationships between art and society, and give a privileged place to poetry for the expression of revolt and sociopolitical critique. Postcolonial theory has long affirmed the centrality of language in colonial domination and movements of liberation, and poetic language is no exception to this. Works written from a minoritarian perspective often pointedly manifest the ways in which poetry and politics can mutually traverse each other. My hope is that the chapters that follow will contribute to a crucial, emerging dialogue between postcolonial literature and theory and French theory that can move us away from the “speculative theory of Art.”⁴

In my first chapter, “From *Engagement* to ‘*Langagement*,’” I show that, despite their antithetical views on engagement, key twentieth-century theorists *agreed* that poetic language and politics are incompatible. I discuss the potential and limitations of Theodor Adorno and Jacques Rancière’s thought. I then argue that the “consensus of incompatibility” is in part the result, first, of an insufficient consideration of compatible interpretative perspectives, and second, of a predominant exclusion of postcolonial thought.

⁴ Nicholas Harrison has recently noted the “apparent divergence, and the possible convergence [of] postcolonial criticism, which is written mainly in English, and certain strands of work in literary theory, often in French,” and expressed the need for articulating “an idea of the literary as both deeply politically involved and as irreducible to any determinate critical or political agenda” (*The Idea of the Literary* iii). These statements resonate with the goal of my dissertation. However, Harrison actually concentrates on defending the literary *against* political (mainly postcolonial) readings.

With these methodological issues in mind, the next three chapters propose a few examples of multidimensional readings, accounting for several compatible political and apolitical implications of poetic form and content. My second chapter, entitled “Poetry and Community,” discusses the ways in which literary journals and live poetic performance can be instrumental in maintaining or creating imagined politico-aesthetic communities. I explore in detail two moments in which the relationships between politics and poetry were negotiated collectively: Aimé Césaire’s 1955 poem “Réponse à Depestre, poète haïtien,” published in *Présence africaine* as part of a larger debate in the journal regarding *négritude* and national poetry, and the memorable performances of Michèle Lalonde and Gaston Miron at Québec’s first *Nuit de la poésie* (1970).

Chapter 3, “Diffracting the Poetic Text,” provides multiple perspectives on Haitian author René Depestre’s poetry. I discuss Depestre’s synthesis of surrealist and Marxist imagery, as well as his creation of poetic subjects that resist ready-made identity categories, moving instead toward a global poetics of mobility and connectedness. I read Depestre’s early poetry, as well as his major work, *A Rainbow for the Christian West*, as both profoundly implicated in the ongoing struggle for the decolonization of bodies and minds, and, as he has claimed, as an individual way to turn one’s back on colonial problems. I also examine the masculinist voice dominating a supposedly apolitical, emancipatory eroticism, and point out a few moments where Depestre’s poetry works against, or at least resists this affirmation of virility.

Finally, “*Agonique*,” my fourth chapter, places Gaston Miron’s collection, *L’Homme rapaillé*, in dialogue with Frantz Fanon, Albert Memmi and Aimé Césaire. I first analyze the poetry collection as a politico-medical portrait, looking at the ways in which sociopolitical alienation is figured as an individual physical and mental illness. I then examine Miron’s presentation of the linguistic and collective circumstances of this condition, before turning to his poetic counter-appropriation of the popular Québécois idiom.

CHAPTER 1
RETHINKING THE POLITICS OF POETRY

In these pages I show that, despite their antithetical views on the relationships between poetry and society, key twentieth century theorists of both commitment and autonomy *agree* that poetic language and political action are incompatible. While commonly celebrating poetry as the purest expression of human feeling and thought, they also disconnect it from the social and political realms. I refer to this dogmatic position as the *consensus of incompatibility*. It constitutes a prominent branch of the “speculative theory of Art” and persists in the works of major literary critics and philosophers today. I demonstrate that even Theodor Adorno and Jacques Rancière, whose work has been read as elaborating a middle ground for thinking about literature and politics, in fact reinstate the same division. I suggest that the consensus of incompatibility results in part from two important methodological shortcomings of a certain critical tradition: an insufficient consideration of complementary interpretative perspectives and the predominant reliance on a narrow set of canonical Western authors.

Sections:

1.1—The Consensus of Incompatibility

1.2—The “Social Essence” of Art in Theodor Adorno

1.3—Misunderstanding: Jacques Rancière’s “Politics of Literature”

1.4—Displacing the Discussion

1.1 – *The Consensus of Incompatibility*

The possibility for poetry to think politics or act politically hardly seems obvious. Even for those thinkers who would not hesitate to *promote* the political commitment of prose, poetic language poses specific problems and is set aside as an exception. Let's recall that Jean-Paul Sartre, in his *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?*, goes so far as to describe Rimbaud's poetry, and more generally all modern poetry, as "inhuman." In a famous passage, he declares the impossibility of poetic commitment:

[...] on comprendra facilement la sottise qu'il y aurait à réclamer un engagement poétique. Sans doute l'émotion, la passion même – et pourquoi pas la colère, l'indignation sociale, la haine politique – sont à l'origine du poème. Mais elles ne s'y *expriment* pas, comme dans un pamphlet ou dans une confession [...] Comment espérer qu'on provoquera l'indignation ou l'enthousiasme politique du lecteur quand précisément on le retire de la condition humaine et qu'on l'invite à considérer, avec les yeux de Dieu, le langage à l'envers. (24-25)

[...] one easily understands how foolish it would be to require a poetic commitment. Doubtless, emotion, even passion – and why not anger, social indignation, and political hatred? – are at the origin of the poem. But they are not *expressed* there, as in a pamphlet or in a confession. [...] How can one hope to provoke the indignation or the political enthusiasm of the reader when the very thing one does is to withdraw him from the human condition and invite him to consider with the eyes of God a language that has been turned inside out?

For Sartre, prose becomes the equivalent of felicitous communication, whose limit or "failure" is embodied by poetry—a sacred language, language "inverted," language in verse. While political discourse is assumed to be a utilitarian speech that incites to specific action, the affective and silent speech

of poetry is an uncommon linguistic usage that *separates*⁵ it from the human condition and renders it politically powerless. This view also relies on a certain conception of politics, reduced to clearly definable class interests, party lines or ideological positions. For Sartre and his followers, as well as their critics, literary engagement thus tends to be equated with an author's personal opinion or written interventions with respect to particular issues and crises.

But *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* also describes another dimension of the politics of writing: silence with regard to political issues does not exempt a writer's work from political implications, since the author has chosen to create a social product. Whatever an author's intentions may be, his or her work is inescapably part of the continuing social struggles of the time. According to Sartre, by virtue of its "anti-expressive" essence, poetry's inability to participate in politics also makes it political: it becomes complicit with the established bourgeois order.

The gesture of separation is repeated by Roland Barthes, who, in his *Degré zero de l'écriture*, writes that modern poetry is "une parole terrible et inhumaine" because its practice is "opposée à la fonction sociale du langage" ("a terrible and inhuman speech"; "opposed to the social function of language"; 39-40). Unlike the imposed official *language* and the solitude of

⁵ The Latin verb *sacrare* also means *to set apart as sacred*. Solemnly and rigidly separating poetic language and poetry from other linguistic usage, cultural practices or society altogether, in the name of privileged access to some divine or spiritual aspect(s) of being, man or nature, can be said to constitute poetry's sacralization (whether or not God or the Muse are explicitly invoked; whether or not it is viewed as saintly or diabolical). All of the thinkers I discuss in the first three sections of this chapter sacralize poetry in some way. For a historical overview of this tendency and its most recent origins in German Romantic thought, see Jean-Marie Schaeffer's excellent analysis, *Art of the Modern Age*.

style, which an author supposedly has no control over, Barthes qualifies *writing* as a social choice, a “rapport entre la création et la société” or “la forme saisie dans son intention humaine et liée ainsi aux grandes crises de l'Histoire” (“relationship between creation and society”; “form considered as human intention and thus linked to the great of History”; 18). He furthermore speaks of classical “poetic writing” and modern “poetic prose” as practices whose conventional linguistic elements maintain an ethical dimension. Yet Barthes also insists on a near absolute divergence between writing and modern poetic language in terms quite similar to Sartre's:

Ces mots-objets sans liaison, parés de toute la violence de leur éclatement, dont la vibration purement mécanique touche étrangement le mot suivant mais s'éteint aussitôt, *ces mots poétiques excluent les hommes: il n'y a pas d'humanisme poétique de la modernité*: ce discours debout est un discours plein de terreur, c'est-à-dire qu'il met l'homme en liaison non pas avec les autres hommes, mais avec les images les plus inhumaines de la Nature [...] A ce moment-là, on peut difficilement parler d'une écriture poétique, car il s'agit d'un langage dont la violence d'autonomie *détruit toute portée éthique*. (my emphasis, 41-42)

These unrelated word-objects, adorned with all the violence of their irruption, whose purely mechanical vibration strangely touches the next word, but is immediately extinguished, *these poetic words exclude humanity: there is no poetic humanism of modernity*: this erect discourse is a discourse full of terror, that is to say that it relates man not to other men, but to the most inhuman images of Nature [...] At such a point, one can hardly speak of a poetic mode of writing, for this is a language whose violent drive toward autonomy *destroys any ethical scope*.

Here, Barthes elaborates on Sartre's painterly and musical metaphors, which see poetic language as using words more for their physical properties than for their communicative value. The argument goes that just as words

would no longer seamlessly connect with each other, their ephemeral resonances also threaten their ties with readers, and hence those ties holding readers together through the communal speech of a society. Yet it seems to be the choice of content that most strongly influences the possibility of commitment here. In Barthes account, words seem to be doing a purely mechanical work alongside, or even because of the apparent nature of their *content*. They do not clearly interact with any sociohistorical discourse or ideology, but rather with “the most inhuman images of Nature.” The “terror” of modern poetry, for Barthes, is then as much a result the anti-communicative use of language as of a supposedly a-historical or a-social subject matter. While Sartre’s content-based commitment had only excluded poetry on the basis of its intransitive form, Barthes’s three-point structure in fact goes even further. In attempting to give an account of a certain commitment to form, Barthes invokes both form and content to exclude modern poetic language from literary commitment.⁶

Despite their differences, both Sartre and Barthes agree that, on the whole, modern poetry is characterized by an inhuman indifference. They corner poetic language into a divine isolation bordering on silence, however strongly a multitude of modern poetic works might resist such a fate. This gesture of separation represents an attempt to isolate the problem of the

⁶ In his article “The Politics of Aesthetics,” Gabriel Rockhill identifies two positions on commitment, associating “content-based commitment” with Sartre and “formal commitment” with Barthes. Rockhill explains that the latter “eventually led to the work of the French structuralists and ‘poststructuralists,’ the Tel Quel group, the *nouveau roman* circles, and certain members of the French New Wave” (195). This chapter shows that the influence of these initial theories extends even into the present day.

linguistic excess inherent in *all* language by making it embody presumably identifiable forms or contents. These can then be excluded as “poetry” (or “literature,” or “art”) from the social and political spheres. Categories such as prose or literature (purged of poetic language) and politics (in its official manifestations) can then more easily be grasped and manipulated.

Nor is the opposite camp any less prone to simplification. The most fervent critics of literary commitment, of course, do not disagree with the opposition between poetic language and politics—they valorize it. Georges Bataille, for example, in the tradition of art for art’s sake, elevates poetic language to the essence of literature as a whole. He echoes Sartre’s and Barthes’s descriptions, stating that “le non-sens de la littérature moderne est plus profond que celui des pierres” (“the non-meaning of modern literature is more profound than that of stones”; 28). Bataille’s valorization of gratuitous excess and absolute sovereignty leads to an equally absolute negation of literary commitment in general. In his open letter to René Char, he claims that “l’incompatibilité de la littérature et de l’engagement, qui oblige, est donc précisément celle de contraires” (“the incompatibility between literature and engagement, which binds, is therefore precisely one of opposites”; 23). Bataille distances literature from engagement, whose efficacy in times of need, he argues, relies on clear communication, making literary language seem trivial.

For Bataille, literature is thus characterized by two extremes: individual freedom and social powerlessness. It remains completely foreign to action except by renouncing this freedom and becoming a servile, partisan or didactic

form of writing. Yet, realizing that varying situations and conditions of authorship may call this view into question, Bataille comments on Sartre's discussion of Richard Wright:

Il arrive que la part exigée par l'action utile porte sur la vie entière. Il n'y a plus, dans le danger, dans l'urgence ou l'humiliation, de place pour le superflu. Mais dès lors, *il n'y a plus de choix*. On a justement allégué le cas de Richard Wright: un Noir du Sud des États-Unis ne pourrait sortir des conditions de contrainte pesant sur ses semblables, dans lesquelles il écrit. Ces conditions, il les reçoit du dehors, il n'a pas *choisi* d'être engagé ainsi. [...] Ce qui est pénible est la libre préférence, quand rien n'est encore exigé du dehors et que l'auteur élit par conviction de faire avant tout œuvre de prosélyte: il nie tout exprès le sens et le fait d'une marge de "passion inutile," d'existence vaine et souveraine, qui est *en son ensemble* l'apanage de l'humanité. (23-24)

The demands of useful action sometimes involve the entirety of one's life. In danger, urgency, or humiliation, there is no more room for the superfluities. From that moment on, *there is no longer a choice*. One has justly put forth the case of Richard Wright: a black man from the American South who was unable to free himself from the constraints that weighed upon his fellow-men, and who wrote within this framework. These circumstances came to him from the outside; he did not *choose* to be committed thus. [...] What is hard to bear is the free choice, when there are no demands from the outside world, that an author makes out of conviction to proselytize: he thus intentionally denies the meaning and the occurrence of a margin of "useless passion," of vain and sovereign existence, which is generally the privilege of humanity.

At this moment in his text, Bataille strangely acknowledges the possibility of an engaged literature, under certain circumstances. Yet in order to nevertheless save the universality of his position regarding useless passion, he places Wright in the absolutely passive situation of an *imposed* intellectual servitude. There can be no middle ground: Wright is thus *excused* for his literary engagement only by the assumption that he *must* and could only

identify with his “fellow-men,” and that he (and they) could *only* write in response to the dictates of social necessity.

This awkward logic points to the extremely fragile nature of the art for art’s sake doctrine, whose basic premise of incompatibility was, as we saw earlier, also incorporated by the first major proponents of engagement with respect to modern poetry. The limits of this premise become especially visible when one is confronted with varying situations of domination and difficult conditions of authorship. There is nothing surprising about the fact that one’s choice of corpus might influence theoretical conclusions. Only one year after *Qu’est-ce que la littérature?*, Sartre wrote *Orphée noir*, entirely devoted to his understanding of the poetic engagement of the *négritude* movement, and concluding that “la poésie noire de langue française est, de nos jours, la seule grande poésie révolutionnaire” (“Black poetry in French is, in our day, the only great revolutionary poetry,” xii). But neither Sartre nor Bataille see that many of the politically relevant features they find foregrounded in Francophone or African American literatures (e.g. the articulation between “I” and “we,” formal and thematic violence, an epic poetic style, fragmented space or time, etc.) are neither intrinsic nor unique to those literatures, and rather point toward a larger *compatibility* of different levels of relation between literature and politics in general.⁷

⁷ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari begin to observe this in *Kafka, pour une littérature mineure*, when they explain that their reappropriation of the term ‘minor’ does not merely designate literature written by minorities, but rather a minor *usage* of a major or established language (33). Yet despite this more generalized understanding of minor as “les conditions révolutionnaires de toute littérature” (“the revolutionary conditions of all literature”), Deleuze and Guattari still place literature written *by* minorities in a kind of passive, exemplary position

The polemic interventions I have just discussed represent prescriptive attempts at defining language, literature and politics, and explaining the relationships between them. They are the key positions around or against which later theorists situate themselves, but they are not merely models of the past, ancient moments of the history of literary theory. Despite the transformations that have occurred in the field for decades, including the rise of deconstruction and postcolonial studies, separations between literature, especially poetry, and politics continue to be variously recycled in contemporary French critical and philosophical work.

This is why, for example, we can see a kind of internal conflict in a study like Benoît Denis's *Littérature et engagement*. Denis repeats Sartre's strategy, respectfully setting poetry aside in order to simplify his task:

De tous les genres littéraires, la poésie est celui que la modernité a symboliquement le plus valorisé, parce qu'en lui se donnaient à voir le plus pleinement les principes qui fondaient l'appréhension moderne de la littérature: le poème est un objet autonome et clos, à lui-même son propre principe et sa propre fin; en lui, le langage se retourne sur lui-même et se prend pour objet, ne disant rien d'autre que cette démarche autoréflexive. Forme intransitive par excellence, la poésie résiste de tout son "être" à l'engagement. (71)

Of all literary genres, poetry is the one that modernity has symbolically valorized the most, because it made most completely visible the principles founding the modern understanding of literature: the poem is an autonomous and closed object. It has its own principle and its own end; within the poem, language returns to itself and takes itself up as an object, saying nothing else besides this self-reflexive process. The ultimate intransitive form, poetry resists engagement with its

where *everything* is intrinsically collective and political, whereas other authors are called on to try to recreate such circumstances: "trouver son propre point de sous-développement, son propre patois, son tiers-monde à soi, son désert à soi" ("finding one's own point of under-development, one's own dialect, one's own third-world, one's own desert," 33).

entire “being.”

The rest of Denis’s history of literary engagement (within metropolitan France) unfolds without concern for poetry, preoccupied rather by genres that are assumed as a whole to be more transparent: theater, the novel, the essay etc. However, Denis is aware of the expanse of the problem he is addressing, as well as the resistance it poses to narrow definitions and oppositions. Introducing his work, he concedes that

il a toujours existé une littérature de combat, soucieuse de prendre part aux controverses politiques ou religieuses [...] Pareillement, le pouvoir s’est toujours soucié des écrivains et de leurs œuvres [...] la littérature n’a jamais été un objet neutre et indifférent en termes politiques

there has always existed a militant literature, concerned with taking part in political or religious controversies [...] Similarly, those in power have always been concerned with writers and their works [...] literature has never been a politically neutral and indifferent object (10-11).

This larger perspective begins to suggest the possibility of moving beyond a restrictive post-revolutionary conception of literature and considering the relationships between works and their sociopolitical environment as multi-layered, and in many ways trans-historical. Denis also discusses the possibility of arguing that “le refus de l’engagement est encore une forme d’engagement, peut-être la plus authentique” (“the refusal of engagement is also a form of engagement, perhaps the most authentic”) and that according to such a vision “toute oeuvre littéraire est à quelque degré engagée” (“any literary work is to some degree engaged,” 10). But all such considerations are immediately dismissed, since Denis believes them to simply

dilute the subject at hand, making it more difficult to ascribe a clear meaning to the term “engagement.” Therefore, despite noting that the question of literary engagement may perhaps be “le propre de toute littérature” (“the particularity of all literature”), he abandons this theoretical opening and, for rigor’s sake, restricts the term to its Sartrean principle (10).

In spite of the initial dismissal, Denis’s hesitation and the temptation to think beyond Sartre are nevertheless evident, and poetry does make two exceptional entrances in his text. First, with respect to Hugo’s *Châtiments*, which Denis speaks of as the last work of true poetic engagement, except perhaps for French Resistance poetry (181); second, regarding Resistance poetry itself, of which Denis surprisingly writes:

[La résistance littéraire] fut pour l’essentiel poétique [...] contredisant avec éclat la conviction sartrienne selon laquelle l’engagement poétique est impossible. Mais il faut aussi dire que les conditions qui ont permis cette grande efflorescence de la poésie résistante [...] disparaissent avec la Libération: la force et la grandeur de ce lyrisme poétique étaient intimement liées à l’Occupation, et à l’acte suprême de liberté que représentait le seul fait d’écrire et de publier clandestinement. (267)

[The literary Resistance] was for the most part poetic [...] spectacularly contradicting the Sartrean conviction that poetic engagement is impossible. But one must also add that the conditions permitting this great flourishing of resistant poetry [...] disappeared with the Liberation: the strength and the grandeur of this poetic lyricism were intimately tied to the Occupation, and to the supreme act of freedom that the mere act of writing and publishing clandestinely represented.

While throughout his text, Denis follows closely in Sartre’s footsteps, here, he admits a potential problem. Yet rather than questioning the impossibility of poetic engagement altogether, Resistance poetry is turned into

an exception with no real theoretical consequences. As was the case for Bataille, it seems as though an extreme lack of choice is invoked in order to justify such a departure from the assumed incompatibility. It is also worth noting that nowhere does Denis discuss *négritude* poetry, nor does he mention *Orphée noir*, despite his vast familiarity with Sartre's work.

Laurent Jenny's *Je suis la révolution* provides us with an even more recent example of continuing attempts to separate poetic language and politics. Jenny's central claim is that the cliché of "poetic" or "literary" revolution never designated anything more than changing conceptions of literature *under the pretense of politics* (6; 213). In other words, on the one hand there are institutional changes, terrorist violence and political emancipations (although, for Jenny, these *real* social upheavals form a rather narrow constellation: 1789, the Paris Commune, 1917, the Maoist Cultural Revolution), and on the other there are authors who play with words and poetic forms, presenting their activity as analogous to properly political action. From Hugo to surrealism, through Blanchot and ending with Tel Quel, Jenny explains that, by referring to "revolution," authors in fact sought to affirm nothing more than literary autonomy, the 'freedom' of different parts of a work that now defied any ultimate unity or intention (verse, words, phonemes), as well as the undoing of ties to a given esthetic heritage or norm.⁸ While

⁸ As this description suggests, Laurent Jenny's motivations for insisting on metaphoricity coincide with Jacques Rancière's characterizations of literature as the esthetic regime of the art of writing, both in terms of the historical break resulting in an indifference that refuses any correlation between genres, subjects and forms, and as the shift toward an indeterminacy of language that is no longer representational. This historical rupture, as we saw earlier, was

acknowledging several shifts in the meanings of “revolution” and “literature,” Jenny’s insistent repetition of the word “metaphor” as the only possible relationship between the two terms appears to be an attempt to constantly confirm a division between politics and literature that is in fact anything but obvious from the texts he examines. In spite of his title, then, Jenny does not consider that linguistic usage might have political dimensions, nor that “revolution” might also refer to and intervene in something other than literary innovation; he does not explore the possibility that literary texts might actually *do* politics, *act* in revolt, or indeed *be* revolutionary. Certainly, ideas such as *changing the world* through poetic originality or expressing *new ideas* in a *new language* that would mirror social transformations are by now clichés. But rather than abandoning the “revolutionary metaphor,” as Jenny suggests, in order to “reconcile with our language,” we still need to evaluate whether it is simply a metaphor, or whether this supposed metaphoricity is not a depoliticizing mode of reading that exempts the critic from needing to work with more complex literary articulations of sociopolitical questions (213). We can continue exploring this thought with respect to Theodor Adorno, whose aesthetic theory relies essentially on the idea of revolt in form, and Jacques Rancière, whose “politics of literature” corresponds to Jenny’s metaphoric “literary revolution.”

already crucial for both Sartre and Barthes, for whom indifference and indeterminacy are qualified as “inhuman.”

1.2—The “Social Essence” of Art in Theodor Adorno

*“Can anyone, you will ask,
but a man who is insensitive to the Muse
talk about lyric poetry and society?”*

—Theodor Adorno, “On Lyric Poetry and Society” (37)

Adorno's thought stands out as one of the most thorough and compelling articulations defending the autonomy of art, while at the same time grappling with the complexity of the relationships between aesthetics and society. It may seem as though he proposes a viable synthesis between these spheres. After all he repeatedly claims that the aesthetic and the social are two aspects of the same object, and that their separation constitutes a misunderstanding of the artistic phenomenon:

Today the nomenclature of formalism and socialist realism is used, with great consequence, to distinguish between the autonomous and the social essence of art. This nomenclature is employed by the administered world to exploit for its own purposes the objective dialectic that inheres in the double character of each and every artwork: These two aspects are severed from each other and used to divide the sheep from the goats. This dichotomization is false because it presents the two dynamically related elements as simple alternatives. (*Aesthetic Theory* 256)

Adorno's affirmations of a “dual nature” or “double character” of art thus seem to reject the kinds of dichotomous thought I have discussed so far. Yet they refer to a very specific relationship, one based on narrow definitions of both “art” and its “social” dimensions. In fact, through these displacements, Adorno's thought contributes to the consensus of incompatibility that I have been sketching out in this chapter, and which I consider to be a part of the

larger system of the “speculative theory of Art” described by Jean-Marie Schaeffer.

In his posthumous *Aesthetic Theory* and other writings on art, it becomes apparent that when Adorno speaks of art, he is in fact speaking of an ideal within a specific conception of society that emerges from the brutality of the historical context. In particular, the shadow of the Second World War falls heavily on his works. Adorno writes “in the wake of the European catastrophes,” in the aftermath of Nazism and in the face of the Communist dream of total conformity, but also with a strong distaste for (American) consumerist culture (*Aesthetic Theory* 189). He frequently denounces the insidiousness of the latter, which, by standardizing cultural products and regulating desire, sacrifices the individual under the “pretense of individualism” (“On the Fetish-Character in Music” 297). Correspondingly, capitalist democracy’s ‘artistic’ life is largely reduced to entertainment in what Adorno terms the “culture industry.” As a result of this situation, Adorno depicts society, regardless of political regime, as ever more alienating and totalitarian.⁹ His work is thus conditioned by a *moral* judgment of society as fundamentally bad or horrific. Society *in itself* is characterized by reification and repression, and it is inevitably trapped in its monstrosity and barbarism.

“True” or “authentic” art, for Adorno, can only be understood in contrast to this conception of society. It becomes a kind of refuge of individual

⁹ For a discussion of the totalitarian tendency of politics as a whole (or rather, politics as a totalitarian tendency), including and especially in contemporary society, see Laurent Dubreuil’s *Refus de la politique*.

expression and potential freedom of thought within a carceral reality. When Adorno speaks of art, then, he is of course speaking of the arts and of artistic works, but he is above all speaking of a specific ideal: that of the genuinely innovative, the singular, the “nonstereotypical,” which reflects the “unrestrained individuation” of the “inextinguishably idiosyncratic particular subject” (*Aesthetic Theory* 254, 41-42; “On Lyric Poetry” 38-40 and passim).¹⁰ This ideal is made to signify an “asocial” attitude that is supposedly intrinsic to art, which Adorno valorizes for its “opposition” or “refusal of society” (*Aesthetic Theory* 133, 226; “On Lyric Poetry” 39 and passim).

It is no surprise, then, that *Aesthetic Theory* begins with the idea that “art’s autonomy remains irrevocable” (1). However, unlike the proponents of art for art’s sake and commitment, Adorno claims to refuse a dichotomy between autonomy and social essence, as we saw in his criticism of “false” divisions at the beginning of this section. How does Adorno attempt to move past this contradiction and maneuver a reconciliation between autotelism and the “double character” of art? I would argue that this is done by displacing the same dichotomy to an opposition between form and content, and by turning autonomy itself into art’s social essence (that is, by adjusting the meaning of the word “social” in such a way as to accommodate the ideal of asociality).

Adorno discusses form as a particular kind of mediation between empirical reality and the artwork. Formal transformation creates a completely autonomous object, “displacing, dissolving, and reconstructing [elements of

¹⁰ This aspect is reminiscent of Bataille’s insistence on a sacred sovereignty of the individual, as is Adorno’s fervent effort to protect or *defend* art.

empirical reality] according to *the work's own law*" (my emphasis, *Aesthetic Theory* 259). However, because of his conception of society, the work's particular "law of form" is not a neutral process; rather, Adorno equates it with a critical "refusal of society" (226). This is an important point that runs throughout *Aesthetic Theory*: form is necessarily a *negation* of society (due to its individual nature), while content or theme maintain an *affirmative* communication with the "outside" (49). The dichotomy between art and the sociopolitical, which Adorno claims he finds untenable, is thus displaced onto an equally artificial division between form and content. And with another linguistic sleight of hand we find that "form is the locus of social content" inasmuch as it is entirely detached from society (230). Adorno explains that "there is nothing pure, nothing structured strictly according to its own immanent law, that does not implicitly criticize the debasement of a situation evolving in the direction of a total exchange society in which everything is heteronomously defined" (226). This, precisely articulated, is how autonomy becomes art's sociopolitical essence, an idea that Adorno restates as "the political participation of the unpolitical" (255).

Several problems result from these procedures. First, they evacuate any true asociality to the extent that this becomes another manifestation of the social. This is a central observation in Laurent Dubreuil's recent work, where he cautions against turning the apolitical back into the political. Dubreuil claims that for "contemporary partisans of political discontinuity," such as Rancière, Badiou, Žižek, and Nancy, "the exterior is always more or less

determined by the interior” (13). As we can see, this is already the case in Adorno as well. Second, as Jean-Marie Schaeffer has pointed out, ascribing a definite essence to art leads to exclusion and prescription. Adorno’s uncompromising stance means that he himself often has recourse to a “dominating supervision” in order to make art comply with its supposed “refusal of society” (246, 226). He in fact also arrives at “[dividing] the sheep from the goats” (256).

In the case of poetry, Adorno writes that “it is precisely what is not social in the lyric poem that is now to become its social aspect” (“On Lyric Poetry” 42). This formulation exposes that what seems like a description is actually a prescriptive definition. Works are called on to *realize* the ideal of form as individual resistance to society. Indeed, on several occasions, Adorno explicitly dictates what the social dimension of art *should* be.

Real denunciation is probably only a capacity of form, which is overlooked by a social aesthetic that believes in themes. (*Aesthetic Theory* 230)

In all art that is still possible, social critique must be raised to the level of form, to the point that it wipes out all manifestly social content. (*Aesthetic Theory* 250)

In other words, form achieves “real denunciation” and “social critique” because it ought to. This circularity betrays the fact that works may not necessarily behave according to Adorno’s system. In his essay, “On Lyric Poetry and Society,” Adorno’s address to the listener/reader makes (partially) visible the prescriptive construction of autonomy, the fact that it is above all a position of reception with respect to the artistic object. Adorno writes:

You experience lyric poetry as something opposed to society, something wholly individual. Your feelings insist that it remain so, feel strongly that lyric expression, having escaped from the weight of material existence, evoke the image of a life free from the coercion of reigning practices, of utility of the relentless pressures of self-preservation. This demand, however, the demand that the lyric word be virginal, is itself social in nature. It implies a protest against a social situation that every individual experiences as hostile, alien, cold, oppressive, and this situation is imprinted in reverse on the poetic work: the more heavily the situation weighs upon it, the more firmly the work resists it by refusing to submit to anything heteronomous and constituting itself solely in accordance with its own laws. The work's distance from mere existence becomes the measure of what is false and bad in the latter. In its protest the poem expresses the dream of a world in which things would be different. The lyric spirit's idiosyncratic opposition to the superior power of material things is a form of reaction to the reification of the world, to the domination of human beings by commodities that has developed since the beginning of the modern era, since the industrial revolution became the dominant force in life. (39-40)

Initially, the experience of autonomy is distinct from the poetic work and consists of a particular relation between the subject and the object (which is one among other possible approaches to the work, albeit the most, and perhaps only, morally praiseworthy one). This rare but important moment in Adorno's work portrays autonomy as an attitude, a *demand*, on the part of the subject rather than an internal property or essence of the object. Midway through this passage, however, autonomy becomes a property of the object itself. This is the same kind of theoretical shift that Schaeffer points to as being at the origin of the "speculative theory of Art" (53-56).

The demand that art be "wholly individual" is described as social in nature. It is presented as social because it is opposed to a universally experienced oppression via society as such (an oppression that varies only in

degree). Again, what Adorno designates as social, then, is in fact an asocial stance. But Adorno is nonetheless correct that autonomy is a social position, although not for the reason he defends. The structure of this essay, which is visible in this excerpt, demonstrates and even enacts the sociality of any attitude toward art. Describing his own view of lyric poetry through an ambiguous second person, he creates a space for a collective perspective, a kind of manifesto: *you (all) experience lyric poetry as I do, we feel that it is and should remain individual, idiosyncratic, free, virginal.*

This social trace is promptly effaced when Adorno shifts to speaking about the poem itself as a form of opposition to the reified world. Extending this procedure to everything that Adorno counts as an artwork and to the arts in general results in mystification (Dubreuil 54) or sacralization (Schaeffer). Art is falsely separated from social norms and practices, from “anything heteronomous.” It is thus limited to a permanent movement of escape and sequestered within its “dream” and its “own laws.” The lyric poem is purged of any relation of exchange with empirical reality which would sully it, and it is defended or protected as “virginal,” as “the most delicate, the most fragile thing that exists” (37).

In the process, art is called on to compensate for society’s moral failings and for the loss of spirituality in a secularizing, consumerist world. Poetic creation begins to resemble the divine or natural inspiration of the *vates* or genius. Adorno’s description of a kind of mystical fusion between subject and form makes this quite visible:

[...] the highest lyric works are those in which the subject, with no remaining trace of mere matter, sounds forth in language until language itself acquires a voice. [...] This is why the lyric reveals itself to be most deeply grounded in society when it does not chime in with society, when it communicates nothing, when, instead, the subject whose expression is successful reaches an accord with language itself, with the inherent tendency of language. (43)

Poetry is thus endowed with an ontological power: by communicating nothing, it reveals the essence of language and social being. This is how Adorno justifies speaking of the relationship between lyric poetry and society without betraying “the Muse,” that is, without falling into a demonstration of “sociological theses” (37). He claims to show that the “social element” (as he defines it) in poetry “reveal[s] something essential about the basis of [lyric works’] quality. This relationship should lead not away from the work of art but deeper into it” (38). In *Aesthetic Theory* as well, what Adorno had mentioned as an *attitude* of protest on the part of the subject is repeatedly presented as inherent to the work (my emphasis):

Social struggles and the relations of classes are *imprinted in the structure* of artworks (232)

The critical concept of society, which *inheres* in authentic artworks *without needing to be added to them* (236)

The liberation of form, which genuinely new art desires, holds *enciphered within it* above all the liberation of society (255)

However, we saw earlier how prescription (“social critique *must be raised to the level of form*, to the point that it wipes out all manifestly social content”) undermines apparent descriptions such as these (250). Nonetheless, we should understand why Adorno wishes so fervently to wipe out social

content or themes. There seem to be two main reasons for this. The first has to do with a reaction to the dictates of socialist realism (and art for art's sake). Adorno argues that "if [commitment] is made the yardstick of censorship, it recapitulates in its attitude toward artworks that element of dominating supervision to which they stood opposed prior to all supervisable commitment" (246). And to the extent that art for art's sake screened its content according to "a dogmatic canon of beauty" it is declared guilty of the same charge of censorship: "*L'art pour l'art's* concept of beauty becomes at once strangely empty and imprisoned by thematic material" (237).

The second reason for requiring the exclusion of openly sociopolitical content is that Adorno assumes that "the political effect even of so-called committed art is highly uncertain," while "political positions deliberately adopted [...] usually impinge on the elaboration of works" (232).¹¹ The assumption is that explicit sociopolitical material brings the work closer to the world of function and exchange. On this territory—because art is still seen as refusing the world even when it is engaged—it doesn't fare well. Meanwhile attention is drawn away from the elaboration of form, that is, from the asocial social dimension that *really* matters and that constitutes the *true* politics of works. This means that art's socio-aesthetic dimension is "impinged" on by a "social aesthetic that believes in themes" (230). However, even within Adorno's own work, the central sociopolitical essence of art (as refusal) turns

¹¹ This is very similar to Bataille's claim that "s'il y a quelque raison d'agir, il faut la dire le moins littérairement qu'il se peut" ("if there is any reason to act, one must state it in the least literary manner possible"; 23).

out to be ambivalent at best, and its effect is just as “highly uncertain” as that of manifestly engaged content. In a memorable passage, Adorno explains that:

In its disproportion to the horror that has transpired and threatens, [art] is condemned to cynicism; even where it directly faces the horror, it diverts attention from it. Its objectivation implies insensitivity to reality. This degrades art to an accomplice of the barbarism to which it succumbs no less when it renounces objectivation and directly plays along, even when this takes the form of polemical commitment. Every artwork today, the radical ones included, has its conservative aspect; its existence helps to secure the spheres of spirit and culture, whose real powerlessness and complicity with the principle of disaster becomes plainly evident. But this conservative element [...] does not simply deserve oblivion. Only insofar as spirit, in its most advanced form, survives and perseveres is any opposition to the total domination of the social totality possible. A humanity to which progressive spirit fails to bequeath what humanity is poised to liquidate would disappear in a barbarism that a reasonable social order should prevent. Art, even as something tolerated in the administered world, embodies what does not allow itself to be managed and what total management suppresses. [...] Asociality becomes the social legitimation of art. (234)

Here, Adorno generalizes what Sartre had denounced as anti-expressive poetry’s *complicity* with bourgeois repression. Art as such, including committed art, becomes conservative, but, Adorno goes on to valorize this conservative element as a safeguard against the totalitarian tendencies society. Powerlessness in the face of catastrophe is turned into a *necessary* (albeit also powerless) willful refusal. This dimension becomes an almost messianic hope that art will somehow protect us from “total domination of the social totality” (234).

Aesthetic Theory begins with the assertion that “all efforts to restore art by giving it a social function [...] are doomed” (1). And among the numerous

aphorisms that punctuate the work, one reads that "insofar as a social function can be predicated for artworks, it is their functionlessness" (227). Yet, at the same time, Adorno invests authentic art and its proper appreciation with the crucial *functions*—he never explicitly frames them as such—of social criticism and resistance to the "always-identical" ("On the Fetish-Character in Music" 314). Art, individuality, form—these intertwined concepts are valued as *instruments* of an imperative protest, humanity's last hope before it would sink entirely into barbarism:

[...] collective powers are liquidating an individuality past saving, but against them only individuals are capable of consciously representing the aims of the collectivity ("On the Fetish-Character in Music" 315).

The liberation of form, which genuinely new art desires, holds enciphered within it above all the liberation of society (*Aesthetic Theory* 255)

Yet, as we have seen, liberation of society in fact stands for liberation *from* society, which makes an ethical end seem false within the logical structure of Adorno's thought. In the meantime, the social reality of artworks themselves is lost from view, and they are stripped of any political implications or power beyond the abstract resistance to the commercialization of life. All relationships between the aesthetic and the sociopolitical are explicitly banned, and not just for the artist and his work, as we have seen at length, but also for the critic contemplating the work. We are told that "the social interpretation of lyric poetry as of all works of art *may not focus* directly on the so-called social perspective or the social interests of the works or their authors" (my emphasis, 38). Adorno's contributions to the consensus of

incompatibility build on a long tradition that continues to thrive decades after him. His equation of true art exclusively with form and with the individual, as well as his insistence that the politics of art lies in its refusal of politics, have most recently been taken up by Jacques Rancière, albeit through a very different vocabulary.

1.3 – Misunderstanding: Jacques Rancière's "Politics of Literature"

*"The modern political animal is above all a literary animal"*¹²

-Jacques Rancière, *La méésentente*

In parallel to a literariness upon which all politics is founded, Jacques Rancière often describes an inherently political dimension of all literature. His approach has been lauded for proposing "an exceptionally promising way of thinking the political and aesthetic questions together, as aspects of a shared problematic" (Hallward 38). Rancière has also been praised for subverting theoretical stereotypes through a "dismantling of the contradiction between a socially determined literature and an 'art for art's sake'" (Kollias 87). Such readings, however, focus on only one level of his articulation of politics and literature, while ignoring the fact that Rancière quite adamantly adopts the central cliché of the art for art's sake position: literature cannot "serve" politics. The back cover of his *Politique de la littérature* explicitly mentions the central aim of showing why "l'égalité littéraire déjoue toute volonté de mettre la littérature au service de la politique ou à sa place" ("literary equality foils any bid to put literature in the service of politics or in its place").

To avoid the risk of falsely ascribing certain thoughts to his work, a meaningful critique of Rancière must move within his own conceptual framework and definitions, at least for a time. Rancière most insistently

¹² The complete sentence I draw this representative quote from reads "L'animal politique moderne est d'abord un animal littéraire, pris dans le circuit d'une littérarité qui défait les rapports entre l'ordre des mots et l'ordre des corps qui déterminaient la place de chacun" ("The modern political animal is above all a literary animal, caught in the circuit of a literariness that undoes the relationships between the order of words and the order of bodies that determine everyone's place"; 61).

defines literature as the result of a historical shift coinciding more or less with the French Revolution and tied to a break with the rigid norms of traditional French poetics.¹³ It is a transition from what he terms the “representational regime” to the “aesthetic regime,” from the hierarchical world of the *Belles Lettres*, where genres and modes of action and expression were dictated by the choice of base or noble subjects, to the triumph of marginal genres, such as the lyric poem and the novel, whose style was now indifferent to the subject or characters being treated, and whose author or reader could be anyone. At the same time, literature, according to Rancière, begins to shun the representational speech of politicians, preferring instead to decipher the speech of silent things, discovering the social truths written on the bodies of objects that escape the public gaze (*Politique de la littérature* 17). Rancière then reads this fundamental indifference and shift in subject matter as “the embodiment of democracy” (12). While for Sartre and Adorno poetry (and all autonomous art), in its “elitist isolation,” implicitly supports the dominant order, Rancière declares the ultimate *egalitarian* character of the artistic production of writing following the decline of the *Belles Lettres* (Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* 254). Literature, the modern art of writing under the aesthetic regime, is thus given a specific political essence. Rancière explicitly redefines “literature as a system of specific thought, not as a collection of works” (Interview: Guénoun and Kavanagh 7).¹⁴ By virtue of its treatment as a

¹³ His most detailed account of this “silent revolution” can be found in *La parole muette*.

¹⁴ Indeed, viewing literature *only* as a historical system leads Rancière to symptomatic readings, which, despite a great attention to detail, inevitably repeat the same conclusions: the indifference, equality and democracy of literature are constantly reaffirmed as its essence.

post-revolutionary system whose production, content, form and reception are supposedly no longer governed by extrinsic norms or rules, literature becomes *intrinsically democratic*, regardless of an individual work's engagement with social issues or any author's political convictions. Rancière's *Politique de la littérature* opens with a passage recalling Adorno's prescription to critics, this time formulated as a categorical definition:

La politique de la littérature n'est pas la politique des écrivains. Elle ne concerne pas leurs engagements personnels dans les luttes politiques ou sociales de leur temps. Elle ne concerne pas non plus la manière dont ils représentent dans leurs livres les structures sociales, les mouvements politiques ou les identités diverses. L'expression 'politique de la littérature' implique que la littérature fait de la politique en tant que littérature. (11)

The politics of literature is not the politics of its writers. It does not deal with their personal commitment to the social and political issues and struggles of their times. Nor does it deal with the way their books represent social structures, political movements or various identities. The expression "politics of literature" means that literature does politics as literature.

These lines fuse literature and politics on one level only to separate them all the more definitively on *all others*.¹⁵ The distance Rancière immediately seeks to establish between a true "politics of literature" and "modes of representation of political events" is especially surprising considering how much he borrows *from* literature in order to develop his own representations of politics.¹⁶ Indeed, in a work such as *La Méésentente*, it is

¹⁵ In an article also entitled "Politics of Literature," we read the same formulation, except that "literature 'does' politics," the quotation marks around "does" suggesting some amount of hesitation regarding literature's political action, even as the democratic system of the art of writing. We also find this hesitation through quotation marks when Rancière is speaking of art's political action in *Le Partage du sensible* (14, 16).

¹⁶ On Rancière's use of literature as a model for his political theory, see "Subjectivation politique et énonciation littéraire," in which Marie De Gandt explains that "Rancière construit

quite clear that events Rancière qualifies as political are defined by his own literary-political interpretations. The foundation of such readings is above all a redefinition of politics based on literature. In order to understand the implications of Rancière's theorization of the relationships between literature and politics, we need to delve into his conception of the political.

Rancière polemicizes against the promotion of an illusory, consensual view of politics which does little more than serve and strengthen the dominant, exclusionary social order. He re-baptizes this order, including power struggles and virtually everything one commonly calls politics, as *police* (*La Méésentente* 51). There is no clear division between the State and society: the police is everywhere, as the dominant form of distribution of sensible experience (*partage du sensible*). Rancière then isolates a *dissensual*, "true" politics that intermittently interrupts the order of the police. The existence of this type of politics relies on situations of *méésentente*. 'Disagreement' is above all a conflict over three main elements: the meanings of words and arguments, the equality of speaking subjects, and the existence of a common space of discussion. For Rancière, there is disagreement (i.e. politics) when words function "abnormally" and subjects are created by a "désidentification, l'arrachement à la naturalité d'une place" ("disidentification, uprooting from the naturalness of a place," 86; 60) It is through the refusal of a socially-determined name or role that those who are not generally seen or heard can begin to speak out. These

le sujet politique sur un modèle implicite, celui de l'énonciation littéraire" ("Rancière constructs the political subject on an implicit model, that of the literary utterance"; 88). On Rancière's practice of reading, see Renaud Pasquier, "Politiques de la lecture."

sans-parts, whose speech does not (yet) count, must also invent a fictive stage upon which dissensus is acted out. Since their interlocutors are likely to ignore or attempt to repress their speech, political subjects must behave *as though* such a common space of debate from a position of equality did exist (81). Rancière's "politics" is thus a reconfiguration of sensible experience through:

- 1) dissensual reinvestment of language resulting in a disruption of "normal" communication
- 2) subjectification as a rejection of an imposed or pre-given identity and the interruption of a stable, unitary "I" (*Aux bords de la politique* 118, *La Mésestente* 77)
- 3) staging that creates a fictional common space in which "those who have no part" can make their speech acts heard

One might infer, then, that it is precisely because of the fact that literature singularly exploits the "difference" inherent in all language, and because reconfigurations of the ways in which common space and time is partitioned and shared occur most frequently through literary works, that Rancière can found his political theory upon *literarity*. Furthermore, to the extent that the structure of political disagreement makes politics "rare [...] toujours locale et occasionnelle" ("rare [...] always local and circumstantial"), always a momentary interruption, an ephemeral rupture in the police, political events might share this transient fragility with the speech acts of literary works (*La Mésestente* 188).

Yet, this does not seem to be what Rancière means when he claims, for

instance, that “l’animal politique modern est d’abord un animal littéraire” (“the modern political animal is above all a literary animal,” *La Mésestente* 61). On the contrary, here, Rancière attempts to extract the adjective “literary” from any specific ties with literary works or literature, redefining it as little more than the capacity to be linguistically inventive in general. He then erects a strange barrier between his two versions of literature: “There is no direct relationship between literature as a political system of circulating words and literature as an historical system of the art of writing” (Interview: Guénoun and Kavanagh 8).

Just as was the case for Adorno, literature becomes *most political* (according to its own political scale) when it *leaves the properly political stage*. The division is reaffirmed time and time again:

Le dissensus littéraire travaille sur les changements d’échelle et de nature des individualités, sur la déconstruction des rapports entre états de choses et significations. Par là il se différencie du travail de subjectivation politique qui configure avec des mots des collectifs nouveaux. [...] Le “malentendu” littéraire tend alors à opposer à la scène de parole propre à la mésestente politique une autre scène, d’autres rapports entre significations et états de choses qui viennent invalider les repères de la subjectivation politique. [...] Le malentendu littéraire tend ainsi à s’écarter du service¹ de la mésestente politique. Il a sa politique [...] propre. (*Politique de la littérature* 54)

Literary dissensus works on changes in the scale and nature of individualities, on deconstruction of the relationships between things and meanings. In this, it is different from the work of political subjectification, which configures new collectives through words. [...] Literary ‘misunderstanding,’ then, tends to oppose the staging of speech peculiar to political ‘disagreement’ with a different staging, one that deploys other relationships between meanings and states of things, and that invalidates the markers of political subjectification. [...] Literary misunderstanding accordingly tends to steer away from serving

political disagreement. It has its own politics [...]

On the one hand, literary dissensus works on the *individual* scale, suspending representational speech, and on the other, political dissensus invents new names and arguments in order to institute the speaking subject as part of a *collective* (*Politique de la littérature* 52). For Rancière, the two practices are necessarily *opposed* to each other, with literary misunderstanding even *invalidating* political disagreement. In order to further highlight the divide between literary and political dissensus (*mésentente*), he gives the former its *own* name: misunderstanding (*malentendu*). It is at this moment of insistence on literature's *own* that we see most clearly how Rancière's numerous shifts in vocabulary nevertheless maintain a dichotomy of individual versus collective, and as a corollary the art for art's sake cliché of literature's impossible "service." Rancière's conception of literary "dissensus" or "misunderstanding" thus continue to promote the consensus of incompatibility.

The division between politics and literature has important implications for re-evaluating what Rancière had proposed as radically subversive democratic political action in *La mésentente*. In every instance where Rancière opposes literature and politics, what had seemed like a "quasi-anarchic disruption of function and place, a sweeping de-classification of speech" in the political sphere becomes much more difficult to distinguish from standard rearrangements of power within the order of the police (Hallward 34). This tendency was already present in *La mésentente*, where, in a key moment,

Rancière claims that

La politique existe lorsque l'ordre naturel de la domination est interrompu par l'institution d'une part des sans-parts. Cette institution est le tout de la politique comme forme spécifique de lien. [...] En dehors de cette institution, il n'y a pas de politique. Il n'y a que l'ordre de la domination ou le désordre de la révolte. (31)

Politics exists when the natural order of domination is interrupted by the institution of a part of those who have no part. This institution is the whole of politics as a specific form of connection. [...] Beyond this set-up there is no politics. There is only the order of domination or the disorder of revolt.

Here, politics relies at first upon interruption, but is then immediately linked to institution, and, in the second sentence it is *identified* with the latter. Between the “order of domination” and the “disorder of revolt,” Rancière seems to be aiming toward a disorderly *order* of politics.¹⁷ Contrary to literature’s work on an individual scale, “la politique isole des sujets collectifs qui disent ‘nous sommes ceci,’ ‘nous voulons cela,’” literary misunderstanding is politically ineffective (“politics selects collective subjects that say ‘we are this,’ ‘we are that’”; Interview: Lancelin). It “leads to no specific form of awareness or mobilization” (Interview: Dasgupta 74). This conflation of literary indeterminateness with political ineffectiveness or withdrawal from politics can be traced back to Sartre.

When Rancière speaks of literature, then, when he claims that “the politics of literature, or the politics of art, is not oriented at the constitution of political subjects,” he makes visible the limitations of his, ultimately, restricted

¹⁷ On the related point of a repatriation of the entire dissensual interruption to political territory, eliminating the possibility of apolitical excess, see Laurent Dubreuil’s “Preamble to Apolitics.”

and traditional view of political action (Interview: Dasgupta 74). Rancière does not seem interested in the ability of literary works to negotiate between individual and collective subjectivities, nor in a *political* action that is not aimed at *this* or *that* unitary cause, but rather a fragmentary or contradictory, perhaps individualized, speaking out of the *sans-parts*.

The end result is that Rancière's "politics of literature," operates what Laurent Dubreuil has called a "wholesale recruitment of the literary" under the essential *democracy* of the aesthetic regime (Dubreuil, "Preamble" 139). It also simultaneously strips literary works of their ability to participate in a dissensual political action whose very structure is founded on a linguistic excess exemplified in literature itself. And as literature risks once again becoming powerless, politics shifts ever closer to the order it was meant to interrupt. Despite the centrality of the "politics of literature" in Rancière's thought, then, a certain clear-cut opposition between political action and literary works remains securely in place. Certainly, Rancière attempts to move beyond simplistic definitions of language, literature and politics, but his interventions with respect to literary engagement leave the epistemic foundations of incompatibility unaltered.

There is a related shortcoming in Rancière's political thought that has implications for his discussions of literature. Due to a partially shared theoretical heritage, Rancière's concepts and vocabulary often seem to converge with those of postcolonial studies. Peter Hallward notes that, in his descriptions of democracy or political community, "Rancière is remarkably

close [...] to positions endorsed by postcolonial critics such as Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, and Gayatri Spivak” (45). Yet, Rancière himself has, to my knowledge, never mentioned their work. This is surprising given that these and other postcolonial theorists have been intensely concerned with relations of domination, linguistic conflict, subversive subjectivity, and the interactions between politics and aesthetics, all issues that are of central importance for Rancière as well. He discusses at length problems of naming, humanity, citizenship, speaking out, and recognition with respect to the proletarian situation. However, he jokingly dismisses the idea that he might relate his work to postcolonial thought:

As you probably know, I am French [laughter]. In France there is no identity politics, there are no postcolonial studies. This means I never had to address those kinds of issues that are crucial in other countries. They are systematically ignored in France. So my dealing with the question of the subject never was an attempt to address issues of identity politics or hybrid, postcolonial identities and so on. (Interview: Dasgupta 74-75)

Of course, Rancière may be half-ironic here and, in a way, he is not wrong in his assessment of a lack of French institutional interest in the postcolonial. However, for all the subversiveness that his political theory might allow us to imagine, such comments demonstrate an acceptance of uncritical alignment with a repressive attitude. By invoking the idea that “there is no identity politics,” Rancière unproblematically places himself within a national collective that actively ignores those *sans-parts* whose being French, or even being within France, is currently an extremely contested matter. And by claiming that “there are no postcolonial studies” he not only disregards the fact

that many of the pioneers of postcolonial thought were Francophone, but also acquiesces to a past and continuing silencing (general and institutional) of the experiences and voices of the colonized and those living in the aftermath of colonization.

If we juxtapose Rancière's *La méésentente* with Homi Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* (published just a year earlier, in 1994), we see that the blind spot of colonial history may have significant implications for Rancière's formulations of both politics and the politics of literature. We immediately observe some substantial points of intersection. Most notably, both scholars rely on the idea that politics is not founded on building consensus through a transparent communication of pre-formed ideas between pre-given subjects. Instead, politics functions through conflicts of representation that concurrently bring into being divided subjects. For both authors, these political subjects are thus "discursive events," inasmuch as they are traversed by a "textuality" or "literarity"¹⁸ that both creates them and allows them to insert a novel voice into the social text (Bhabha 34).

In his interpretation of John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty*, Bhabha shows that not only is there "no knowledge – political or otherwise – outside of representation," but also that political knowledge is necessarily constituted through difference (33). This means less so the confrontation *between* various political views than the tensions and divisions *within* them. Thus, "a

¹⁸ Bhabha's and Rancière's shared view of language as a site of constant displacement is also visible in the performances of their works, as they each create their own hybrid voice from the echoes of what others have said or written.

knowledge can only become political through an agonistic process: dissensus, alterity and otherness are the discursive conditions for the circulation and recognition of a politicized subject” (Bhabha 34). For both Bhabha and Rancière, then, politics is a manifestation of difference. It occurs through interruptions of order that make visible the gaps between words and things, between the idea of equality and its empirical denial. The political subject is formed in these gaps, not as a group that becomes conscious of a supposedly originary or authentic identity, but rather as a hybrid entity: “*neither the One... nor the Other... but something else besides*, which contests the terms and territories of both” (Bhabha 41). However, it is in describing this “in-between”¹⁹ subject that, while Bhabha’s and Rancière’s vocabularies coincide, the divergence in their thought becomes most clear.

Specifically, beyond the romantic allure of his “quasi-anarchic” interruptions, Rancière’s politics remains concerned principally with highly structured collective class or gender claims. This, of course, greatly limits the frequency and scope of political reconfigurations of societal distribution. Thus, despite the theoretical flexibility that the *sans-parts* might seem to offer, including the resonance with *sans-papiers*, this space seems destined to be

¹⁹ See Bhabha p. 2, 19 and passim; Rancière, *La méésentente* p. 186 and *Aux bords du politique* p. 119: “un sujet est un *in-between*, un entre-deux. *Prolétaires* fut le nom ‘propre’ à des gens qui étaient ensemble pour autant qu’ils étaient *entre*: entre plusieurs noms, statuts ou identités; entre l’humanité et l’inhumanité, la citoyenneté et son déni; entre le statut de l’homme de l’outil et celui de l’être parlant et pensant” (“a subject is an in-between. *Proletarians* was the ‘proper’ name given to people who were together inasmuch as they were *between*: between several names, statuses, and identities; between humanity and inhumanity, citizenship and its denial; between the status of a man of tools and the status of a speaking and thinking being”). It is striking that Rancière uses the English term “in-between” here, which has the effect of distancing him from a Derridean “entre” that refuses the unity of its alternatives.

filled by only a few pre-approved candidates for subjectification, while others are dismissed as “identity politics” that are really part of the police.

It is worth noting that Rancière only approaches contemporary racial discrimination in France as the effect of the decline of politics (*Aux bords de la politique* 124-125). The term “*immigré*” is voided of any historical ties to colonialism and continuing forms of colonial racism. Instead, Rancière speaks of “l’intrusion brutale des nouvelles formes du racisme et de la xénophobie dans nos régimes consensuels” (“the violent intrusion of new forms of racism and xenophobia into our consensual regimes” *La Mécontente* 160):

Il y a vingt ans, nous n’avions pas beaucoup moins d’immigrés. Mais ils portaient un autre nom: ils s’appelaient travailleurs immigrés ou, tout simplement, ouvriers. L’immigré aujourd’hui, c’est d’abord un ouvrier qui a perdu son second nom, qui a perdu la forme politique de son identité et de son altérité, la forme d’une subjectivation politique du compte des in comptés. Il ne lui reste alors qu’une identité sociologique, laquelle bascule alors dans la nudité anthropologique d’une race et d’une peau différentes. [...] L’effacement de ces modes politiques d’apparence et de subjectivation du litige a pour conséquence la réapparition brutale dans le réel d’une altérité qui ne se symbolise plus. (*La Mécontente* 161)

Twenty years ago, we didn’t have many more immigrants. But they had another name: they were called migrant workers or simply workers. Today, the immigrant is first a worker who has lost his second name, who has lost the political form of his identity and alterity, the form of a political subjectification of the count of the uncoun ted. All he has left, then, is a sociological identity, which topples over into the anthropological nudity of a different race and skin. [...] The erasure of these political modes of appearance and subjectification of the dispute results results in the violent reappearance in the real of an alterity that can no longer be symbolized.

Rancière adopts a perspective from which he observes the passive “loss” of the political *worker* subjectivity, leaving nothing but the “nudity” of “pre-

political” skin color (*La Mésentente* 162). The “immigrant”’s political agency thus seems to be entirely restricted to a visibility as worker. As we saw earlier in his interview response dismissing postcolonial studies, Rancière regularly eschews any discussion of the possibility of racial or cultural modes of symbolization and political subjectification. He strangely speaks from an ethnocentric, dominant position, taking the efficacy of the de-politicization of “the immigrant” as a given. His analysis misses both the diversity of the “immigrant” category and the very old form of racism that underlies the constant, anxious refigurations of a radical alterity as attempts to reaffirm white, “French” national unity and cultural supremacy.

Because questions of power supposedly do not enter into politics, Rancière does not explore the extent to which various degrees of police *and* politics may be involved in all sociopolitical struggles, nor does he envision the overlapping forms of subjectification occurring, for example, as a result of colonial history. Cultural or racial domination, however, necessarily complicate any conception of proletarian politics, and Bhabha is well aware of this. His concept of “hybridity” builds from this perspective, recognizing that “questions of race and cultural difference overlay issues of sexuality and gender and overdetermine the social alliances of class and democratic socialism. [...] The very language of cultural community needs to be rethought from a postcolonial perspective” (251).

I do not not want to minimize the importance of Jacques Rancière’s work; nor is he the only thinker to ignore the importance of postcolonial

studies to political theory. He is part of a generation of French political philosophers who have focused their efforts on redefining concepts such as the political, the universal, the subject, community, and democracy in empowering and liberating ways. However, as Leela Gandhi has recently noted, many of these prominent thinkers (among them Alain Badiou, Étienne Balibar, and Jean-Luc Nancy) all share a tendency toward dismissing the importance of postcolonial theory in rethinking such concepts. Gandhi explains that even for those who, like Rancière, are not explicitly hostile toward postcolonial studies, the avoidance amounts to a refusal to participate in clarifying “the crucial historical symbiosis between anticolonialism and democracy” (31). This predominant exclusion was also noted by Edward Said, whose work *Culture and Imperialism* claims that a majority of Western theoreticians remain “stunningly silent on racist theory, anti-imperialist resistance, and oppositional practice in the empire,” and yet they assume their thought has “an implied applicability to the whole world” (278).²⁰ These omissions not only contribute to “silencing the past,”²¹ but they also miss the extent of continuing imperialist attitudes and practices that are deeply embedded and propagated across different cultures and discourses, including discussions of literature and

²⁰ With respect to postcolonial literature, Laurent Dubreuil makes a related claim, explaining its exclusion in terms of 20th century theory’s turn toward literature for philosophical renewal: “the legend of a particular dialogue between philosophy and literature was once again promoted, to the detriment of other epistemic responses literary oeuvres could bring and of entire textual contents, often including (post)colonial *parole*” (“Literature after theory” 241).

²¹ I am referring here to Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s work discussing the ways in which certain events, characters, and facts are silenced in the production of history “due to uneven power in the production of sources, archives and narratives” (27). Also see Laurent Dubreuil’s *Empire du langage*, exposing the vast range of conscious and unconscious ways in which “indigenous speech” is silenced, be it through denial, censorship, dismissive reception, ideological prescription, etc. Dubreuil argues for vigilance with respect to continuations of colonial thought in literature as well as in critical discourse in the humanities and social sciences.

its relationships with society. Laurent Dubreuil views the exclusion of postcolonial literature as part of this same systemic problem, suggesting it is related to 20th-century theory's turn toward literature for philosophical renewal: "the legend of a particular dialogue between philosophy and literature was once again promoted, to the detriment of other epistemic responses literary oeuvres could bring and of entire textual contents, often including (post)colonial *parole*" ("Literature after theory" 241). Among these epistemic responses is an intense engagement with politics and the political.

Returning to the question of the "politics of literature," we should finally observe that Rancière privileges a 19th-century canonical corpus (Balzac, Flaubert, Wordsworth, Mallarmé, Rimbaud) which he often renews in interesting ways through Marxist readings (Pasquier 43). However, his view of literature and its politics in terms of a homogenous system means that he can easily dismiss questions regarding his choice of corpus—ignoring pre-1800 which are part of the representative regime, as well as non-canonical and Francophone works since they use "tried and true forms" without inventing any new politics of literature (Interview: Guénoun and Kavanagh; Interview: Ruffel). At best, he offers a vague justification for this avoidance:

The problem is not doing justice to everyone, creating a balance between male literature and female literature, French literature from France or francophone literature from Canada, Africa, the Caribbean. The important thing is, on the one hand, the democracy practiced by literature itself and, on the other, the democracy that is going to be practiced by those who appropriate it. (Interview: Baronian and Rosello)

Despite Rancière's attempt to frame the consideration of Francophone

literatures as merely a question of political correctness, the appropriation of French language and literary history, and the relationships between this gesture and political revolt and liberation, have often been central to Francophone postcolonial texts. Confronting Rancière's hypothesis with Francophone works allows us to view literature more as an art of writing that can be both politically complicit and potentially empowering, in any case whose politics extends beyond "misunderstanding" into the realm of political "disagreement". Contexts in which an entire society, and language itself, are dominated *matter* when discussing public visibility and whose speech is taken into account.

1.4 – Displacing the Discussion

I have been arguing that the antagonism toward politics that these key figures of 20th century thought claim to identify in poetry, literature or art, is not a characteristic of these phenomena in themselves. As has become evident through my discussion, I find that this theoretical dead end is the result of at least two important methodological shortcomings:

(1) the unknowing or expedient evacuation of a multiplicity of complex, compatible interpretative perspectives, that is, the equation of poetry exclusively with an autonomous, aesthetic object, assumed to have an apolitical, asocial or ahistorical essence. I view this as a result of what Schaeffer has described as the sacralization of poetry (and art) by the “speculative theory of Art,” whose central tenets and attitudes still dominate contemporary discussions.

(2) in the particular case of a certain French tradition, the continued marginalization of postcolonial thought and Francophone works, whose consideration may help orient conventional literary criticism toward more productive articulations of the relationships between poetry and politics.²²

²² I am aware of the criticisms addressed to postcolonial theory regarding its “politicized” or “non-literary” readings by critics such as Nicholas Harrison. I am not issuing a blanket valorization of the writings comprising postcolonial studies, nor do I agree with prescriptions of authorial responsibility or authenticity which have occasionally emerged from this body of work (although, as we saw earlier such prescriptions were equally present in the thought of Sartre or Adorno, for instance). I find, however, that even an emphasis on non-formal levels of analysis can enrich our understanding of a work, and I see no contradiction between analysis of form and analysis of other textual dimensions. Carrie Noland’s discussion of Aimé Césaire

Although certain works may indeed engage with the political in a predominantly dismissive manner, this can by no means be turned into the overarching principle of poetic language in itself. Nor can indeterminacy be used to cut off any relations with the sociopolitical. The declaration of incompatibility is rather a mode of reading: the result of a supposedly neutral activity of neutralization.

The discussion of whether or not poetry is political benefits greatly from being displaced or reformulated in terms of *how* poetry is political. In a critique of Rancière, Gabriel Rockhill explains that

artistic production is a dynamic process that is part of a sociohistorical world. This means that there is no permanent politics of art; there are only various modes of politicization. And these take place in different dimensions: not only at the level of historical régimes (Rancière) but also at the level of production, circulation, and reception (215).

Indeed, any literary work sees and makes visible certain things or people and represses or remains ignorant of others; maintains certain norms, traditions, and values and subverts others; engages in varying ways, and with differing degrees of agreement or critique, with a range of discourses, including political thought, historical events, social problems. These micro-politics of individual works are also compatible with wider politics of literary movements, with historical trends in literature as a whole or even with contributions to police order. These different political layers certainly do not annul the polysemic and fundamentally open character of works. Furthermore,

in “Red Front/Black Front” or Claude Filteau’s *L’espace poétique de Gaston Miron* offer excellent examples of a productive synthesis between multiple levels of analysis.

it is important to remember that discussing the politics of literary works is not equivalent with claiming that they are political through and through. In all of these ways, literary works point to the insufficiency of a “doctrine of aesthetic autonomy,” just as much as they always *also* extend beyond any ideological or moral position, and beyond politics (Said, *Culture and Imperialism* 316).²³

Rather than drawing attention away from aesthetics or invalidating literature’s “own” political action, discussions of the politics of form, historical context, reception, intertextuality, ideology, etc. simultaneously show the breadth of politics’ reach and the multiplicity of points from which critique or dissensus can occur. The “politics of poetry,” then, can be considered in its largest sense as a fundamental, multidimensional compatibility—from the representation of commitment to a party or policy to the formal deconstruction of oftentimes invisible regulatory workings of daily language, from the positive expression of an author’s message or ideological conviction to a critical engagement with the language of social and political discourses.²⁴

This last form of relation is not far from the dissensual *parole* described by Laurent Dubreuil in his *Empire du langage*. For Dubreuil, literature is an “indiscipline;”²⁵ it traverses the entire continuum of linguistic practices,

²³ For one possible perspective on this point, see Dubreuil, “L’apolitique de Maupassant.”

²⁴ This can, of course, include the kind of engagement for or on behalf of a mother tongue that Lise Gauvin terms “*langagement*,” the title of her work on the history of literary politics in Québec. Gauvin’s usage of this term mainly implies authors’ attitudes towards language in Francophone societies, especially those where there is a conflict between two or multiple languages. The resulting “surconscience linguistique” produces what Gauvin calls “littératures d’intranquillité” (*Langagement* 8, 11) and the feeling that one’s mother tongue is “sans cesse à (re)conquérir” (“linguistic superconsciousness”; “literatures of intranquility”; “ceaselessly to be recovered”; *La fabrique de la langue* 258).

²⁵ For a detailed explanation of the term “indiscipline” see “Défauts de savoirs.” Dubreuil also speaks of the “upheavals of literature” in “What is literature’s now?” where he concludes that

weaving links with any discourse, discipline or idiom to make words resonate or signify differently and to create an unexpected *parole* (*Empire* 12). One dimension of this *parole*, present to varying degrees in different texts, is a critical dialogue with politics that exposes the ways in which language can both sustain and trouble an oppressive order. Dubreuil argues that:

Le langage, par toutes les dispositions de son *empirie* (énoncés, phrase, discours, langue, ton, style, voix, parole, texte, discipline, littérature, etc.), est à même de servir et desservir l'empire qu'il soutient. [...] La littérature par dessus tout, se trouvant en quelque sorte garante de la signification, décompose les langages ordinaires, et, plus souvent que la déclaration politique, la loi ou la conversation, produit des singularités qui repoussent les effets de coercition. (12)

Language, through all of its empirical arrangements (statements, phrasing, discourses, tongue, tone, style, voice, speech, text, discipline, literature, etc.), is in a position to both serve and harm the empire it supports [...] Literature, above all, as responsible for signification, decomposes ordinary modes of language, and, more often than a political declaration, law or conversation, produces singularities that repel the effects of coercion.

The very structure of language, its iterability, supports the reproduction of order, but also allows its subversion. For Dubreuil, the “linguistic reality” of empire, and of any relation of power, can therefore falter at any point. But as a transhistorical “art of re-agencing previous speeches,” Dubreuil argues that literature cultivates dissensus and makes resistance more probable (“Literature after theory” 243). Turning away from imposing an essence on art as a whole, Dubreuil insists on the importance of distinctions between the arts and between individual works. He also seems to frame literary apolitics as a

“literary studies are no discipline (if they ever had been). They are an *indiscipline*, a commitment to rebellion in thought” (67).

tendency rather than literature's fundamental dimension:

Dans le cas de la littérature, des éléments spécifiques (en particulier la poétique comme *réponse* aux ordres langagiers) insistent en faveur d'émergences cette fois apolitiques. Ces dernières peuvent surgir en plus du contrôle conceptuel, historique, social, mondain, discursif que le texte par ailleurs amplifie ou valide; ou bien escorter une description de l'horreur de la Cité. (*Refus de la politique* 53)

In the case of literature, specific elements (in particular poetics as a *response* to linguistic orders) now insist in favor of apolitical emergences. These can appear in addition to any conceptual, historical, social, mundane, or discursive control that the text otherwise amplifies or validates: or else they can accompany a description of the City's horror.

Literary works can deny, censor, forget, injure or excuse, but they can also expose techniques of domination, denounce violence, call for resistance, and create liberating ways of thinking and speaking about identity and community. Simultaneously literature's reflexivity points to the undisciplined forces that belie communication. Because literary writing draws attention to itself, "literature shows us what language is able to do [...] The experience of the literary invites us to violently reconsider how, and why, we speak and think" ("Literature after theory" 243).

As the literary form where linguistic contradictions and excess of meaning are exhibited with the greatest density, poetry is potentially the place where the most subversive *parole* can emerge. While never explicitly making such a claim, Edward Said's *Culture and Imperialism* seems to confirm this affinity. In a chapter entitled "Consolidated Vision," Said discusses the complicity between canonical works and empire, focusing on 19th century novels. Yet in his next chapter, "Resistance and Opposition," there is a

substantial shift both in Said's choice of examples and in his vocabulary. Specifically, he suggests that poetic language is needed to counteract the authority of narrative. He thus focuses more on poets, such as Yeats or Césaire. Even in his heavy reliance on Fanon, he comments that, "in passages of an incandescent power, Fanon resorts to poetry and drama," and "in the obscurity and difficulty of Fanon's prose, there are enough poetic and visionary suggestions to make the case for liberation as a process and not as a goal contained automatically by the newly independent nations" (Said 247). Similarly, this section closes with praise of C.L.R. James's juxtaposition of Césaire and T.S. Eliott. The most hopeful elements of Said's text are tied to poetic language, as embodying a "nomadic, migratory, and anti-narrative energy" necessary for breaking down restrictive patterns of thought (279). Laurent Dubreuil echoes this necessity, stating that "il serait vain de croire que la renonciation du discours colonial aura lieu sans passage par la poésie" ("it would be an illusion to believe that renouncing colonial discourse will occur without poetry"; 162).

As I mentioned earlier, the questioning of power that poetic language can provoke is by no means unique to postcolonial literature. However, its recognition is even more crucial and potentially liberating in contexts of domination, where the ability to speak out is constantly undermined and the status and use of a language itself is at stake. Works written from a minoritarian perspective intensely manifest the ways in which literature and politics can mutually traverse each other. The heritage of domination and

diglossia confronting many Francophone authors has resulted in countless works that are insistently preoccupied with the status of language and literature's sociopolitical powers. Yet, as we have seen this immense body of work is most often ignored in both discussions of literary engagement and in continuing variations on the art for art's sake position.

In *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said powerfully explains that this persistent avoidance reflects a much larger theoretical and institutional problem of ignoring the crucial plurality of perspectives needed to approach an understanding of any literary text:

We have on the one hand an isolated cultural sphere, believed to be freely and unconditionally available to weightless theoretical speculation and investigation, and, on the other, a debased political sphere where the real struggle between interests is supposed to occur. [...] A radical falsification has become established in this separation. Culture is exonerated of any entanglements with power, representations are considered only as apolitical images to be parsed and construed as so many grammars of exchange, and the divorce of the present from the past is assumed to be complete. And yet, far from this separation of spheres being a neutral or accidental choice, its real meaning is as an act of complicity, the humanist's choice of a disguised, denuded, systematically purged textual model over a more embattled model, whose principal features would inevitably coalesce around the continuing struggle over the question of empire itself. (Said 57)

Said points to the fact that the consensus of incompatibility has seeped into contemporary critical discourse, where it is now routinely and unproblematically used to dismiss questions of sociopolitical context and

implications.²⁶ In his extensive study, the inadequacy of such a perspective becomes immediately obvious when confronted not only with works of anticolonial resistance, but also with readings of the Western canon that pay attention to the reproduction of colonial attitudes. Said convincingly shows that classic works by Austen, Camus, or Flaubert also draw on imperialist discourse and constitute a complicit part of an ideological system that was in principle challengeable and, at times, challenged. His interpretation does not amount to calling for ideological reading, but rather, in addition to other forms of critical attention, for an awareness of the ways in which ideology informs particular works of literature. With respect to literary criticism, Said's argument is that an unexamined belief in an incompatibility between literature and politics is at best the result an oversimplification or indifference and at worst a conscious choice of complicity.

Similarly, Anne Berger's recent article, "La beauté en quelques dates," addresses this same question of "l'opposition aujourd'hui convenue de l'esthétique et du politique" from a wider perspective, sketching out its origins and limitations ("today's commonplace opposition between aesthetics and

²⁶ A recent example of what Said describes as exempting culture from sociopolitical implications could be Nicholas Harrison's *Postcolonial Criticism*. Here, Harrison undertakes a rather polemic critique of "the postcolonial literary critic" and offers a reaffirmation of what he considers to be a proper literary criticism. Harrison's argument is that literature's indeterminacy neutralizes its politics. Furthermore, even if it were in any way political, any impact it might have wouldn't amount to much (readers are just reading, and they know it). In an echo of Bataille, Harrison states that, if one is interested in politics and "is faced with the propagation of imperialist discourse and practices, and other forms of violence and inequality, it can seem trivial and trivializing to dwell on the particularities of literary structure, or to spend one's time on fiction at all" (60). Such a statement in fact trivializes literature. While I agree with Harrison on the importance of "doing justice" to literary specificity, I wonder why this form of "justice" is once again framed as being necessarily separate from and in conflict with others.

politics”). Like Schaeffer, Berger reminds us that the insistent 19th century preoccupation with Beauty, and the often accompanying literary contempt for the ethical and political spheres, can be understood in relation to the rise of capitalism. On one level, what was presented as an exclusive concern with Beauty as an end in itself was a form of resistance to the market’s totalizing commercialization. Yet it is just as important, Berger argues, to remember that numerous poets, such as Rimbaud or Hugo, shattered this dichotomy. Such examples of the political in the poetic and the poetic in the political often became obscured in the overgeneralizations of 20th century criticism and theory, where the idea of incompatibility continued to reign, be it this time in the form of a turn against purely aesthetic concerns (recall Sartre’s interpretation of Rimbaud with which I began this chapter), and then again as a reaction to neo-Marxist and even postcolonial criticism.

Berger concludes with two striking postcolonial examples. She first recalls a 2012 discourse on the equality of civilizations by Martinican *Député* Serge Letchimy that scandalized the *Assemblée nationale*. For Berger, Letchimy’s rhetorical excesses, summoning “des émotions indissociablement esthétiques et politiques,” manipulated a certain literary history through parallels with figures such as Hugo or Césaire (“indissociably aesthetic and political emotions”). The scandal, Berger argues, was precisely that Letchimy transgressed what I have been calling the consensus of incompatibility by appropriating the style of these poet-politicians for whom poetic language was intimately tied with a collective historical situation, sociopolitical

emancipation, and poetico-political ideals. Secondly, Berger evokes Aimé Césaire himself, for whom she holds that “c’est justement le propos ‘esthétisant’ qui comporte la plus forte charge politique” (“it is precisely ‘aestheticizing’ speech that plays the strongest political role”). The publication of Césaire’s *Cahier*, Letchimy’s recent speech— for Berger these dates frame a part of literary history that ought not be forgotten, a community of authors whose voices, informed by the experiences and continuations of imperialism, realize a poetics of revolt, or as Berger puts it “la charge d’une beauté révoltée” (“the charge of a beauty in revolt”).

Again, not all literary works divert language with the same violence or empower subjects to the same extent, and indeed, many contribute to, or simply unknowingly reproduce various aspects of oppressive discourses. Attention to different levels of analysis necessarily leads away from viewing entire works, particular authors, or literature as a whole as simply “inhuman,” “indifferent,” “asocial,” “aristocratic” or “democratic.” It also leads away from any reductive separation of literature as functioning on a deconstructive, individual scale, versus politics as relying on coherent, collective movements: these dimensions are inextricably intertwined. Thinkers like Bhabha, Dubreuil, Said, and Berger incite us to look beyond the consensus of incompatibility, to value the countless examples of resistance, whenever and wherever they may arise, and through them, to strive for a better understanding of the imbricated layers of relation between politics and aesthetics.

CHAPTER 2

POETRY AND COMMUNITY

The voices that resonate throughout this chapter are marked by and remark a linguistic conflict that is intimately tied to politics. They interpellate the reader—friend or foe—demanding solidarity, recognition or attention. They refuse the diverse manifestations of an imposed silence. They stage a linguistic confrontation that underlies any emancipation of a subject, empowerment of a community, or questioning of History. The voices affirming themselves throughout these pages—once calling out with protesters in the streets, debating in journals and newspapers, or performing in crowded amphitheaters—enact a revolt that can still speak out today.

One angle from which we can perceive several dimensions of the politics of poetry is that of community. While poetry is often associated with individual and even individualistic production and readership, it is also important to insist on the collective and communal elements of particular works and of literature as a whole. By “communal” I mean not simply literature's relationships with some pre-identified community, but also the way it can create or prefigure new collectivities.

Any community is necessarily imagined, and the formation, propagation and disintegration of imagined communities rely heavily on language. That poetic language is also involved in these processes should

therefore hardly seem surprising. Epic poetry, fables, classical theater, salons, anthems, poetry slams, rap—in countless ways throughout the centuries, poetic language, like literature and art more generally, has been a medium for sharing thoughts, values, beliefs, emotions or goals. Examining how poetry participates in community is therefore central to understanding the compatibility of literature and politics. This participation can take numerous forms, only a few of which I will discuss in this chapter. They include, for example, a particular work's implicit or explicit representations of or interventions in sociopolitical events or concerns. They also involve the politics of language, the usage of popular dialect or code-switching, and differing degrees of linguistic displacements or disfigurations. Other forms of community are implied simply by varying kinds of reception, from the solitary reader in her armchair by the fireplace, to the judgments and analyses of critics and literary journals, to the relation between a poet and her work with a more centralized site of power that can laud or censor. This also includes the way a text is informed by or contributes to the expectations and conventions of the time, or perhaps the literary movements it seeks to affiliate itself with, withdraw from, critique or oppose. There is also community in the relations of poets with other poets (past and present) and in the relations of readers with each other.

In this chapter I first discuss two theories of the relationships between literature and political community: Benedict Anderson's argument that modern nations themselves relied on the literary imagination to develop, and

Martha Nussbaum's claim that literature can make crucial contributions "to the law in particular, to public reasoning generally" (xiii). I then examine two "case studies" in maintaining or creating imagined politico-aesthetic communities: Aimé Césaire's 1955 poem "Réponse à Depestre, poète haïtien," published in *Présence africaine* as part of a larger debate in the journal regarding *négritude* and national poetry, and performances by Michèle Lalonde and Gaston Miron during Québec's *Nuit de la poésie* of 1970. These examples illustrate the fact that poetic form and content have several compatible political implications; that, as a social act, poetry depends on and contributes to shared aesthetic and political beliefs and goals; and that certain poems incite both empathy and critical citizenship by allowing readers and audience members to internalize strong emotions linked to political reality.

Sections:

2.1—Literature and Political Community

2.2—Negotiating Négritude's Poetic Values: Aimé Césaire's "Réponse à Depestre"

2.3—Poetic Performance as Political Event: Québec's First Nuit de la poésie

2.1—*Literature and Political Community*

Benedict Anderson's groundbreaking *Imagined Communities* was crucial to furthering our understanding of how the immense political community of the nation emerged from its religious precursors. Most importantly, Anderson's work shows how "from the start the nation was conceived in language, not in blood," while simultaneously representing itself in terms of metaphoric blood relations, that is, as an entity "to which one is naturally tied" (145, 143).

According to Anderson, the democratization of writing and the accompanying homogenization of language permitted a displacement of religious faith towards a faith in another type of communal consciousness: the nation. Anderson establishes an essential link between the invention of the printing press, and more specifically the widespread dissemination of newspapers and novels, and the construction of the national imaginary. Through an omniscient position, any reader can imagine other individuals behaving similarly throughout a territory. The reader begins to live in complete confidence of the regular and simultaneous activity of these anonymous others regardless of the distance separating them. Reading thus permits a certain relation of intimacy, since readers can imagine themselves as comparable, and hence representative. They become representative bodies through which the national (or imperial) body is realized and constantly reborn. In this sense, literature is part of a wider process of cultural, ideological and behavioral homogenization. Anderson explains how, even

when newspapers might have offered information that was seemingly indifferent to politics, they nevertheless reinforced this assemblage of fellow-readers, paving the way for national consciousness.

Early gazettes contained – aside from news about the metropole – commercial news (when ships would arrive and depart, what prices were current for what commodities in what ports), as well as colonial political appointments, marriages of the wealthy, and so forth. In other words, what brought together, on the same page, *this* marriage with *that* ship, *this* price with *that* bishop, was the very structure of the colonial administration and market-system itself. In this way, the newspaper of Caracas quite naturally, and even apolitically, created an imagined community among a specific assemblage of fellow-readers, to whom *these* ships, brides, bishops, and prices belonged. In time, of course, it was only to be expected that political elements would enter in. (62)

For Anderson, the national community and the cohesion of empire is thus founded at once on communication (or more specifically the mass publication and reading of various forms of prose) and the sometimes vague, sometimes concrete idea of possession that communication permits: the possession of a common language and culture, as well as the possession of a territory and its resources. This implies that writing and reading can already act politically even when content is ostensibly apolitical. Anderson also foregrounds the intrinsically public character of any publication, and the organizational force it inevitably inserts into society on some level.

Anderson's conception of literature, which tends to assimilate it to communication, does however have some important limitations. For the purposes of his argument, Anderson ignores differences between novel and newspaper, leading to a vision which makes the newspaper into an "extreme

form of the book, a book that sells on a colossal scale but whose popularity is ephemeral” (Anderson 46). One shortcoming of perceiving the newspaper as a “one-day best-seller” is that it leaves literary usage of language out of the discussion. Yet elements of content, form or poetic excess can be either associative or dissociative to different degrees, depending on the particular text. Because Anderson treats writing on an entirely different level of analysis, he erases the singularity of works as well as the singularity of the individuals writing and reading them. Indeed the epitome of community according to Anderson is:

a special kind of contemporaneous community which language alone suggests— above all in the form of poetry and song. Take national anthems, for example, sung on national holidays. No matter how banal the words and mediocre the tunes, there is in this singing an experience of simultaneity. At precisely such moments, people wholly unknown to each other utter the same verses to the same melody. The image: unisonance [...] the echoed physical realization of the imagined community. (145)

This passage describes how an intense sense of community can be created through the concrete physical and emotional impact of certain cultural productions. Through its emphasis on sound and rhythm, elements exceeding the written page, poetic language is particularly able to create such effects. However, the quasi-militaristic order of Anderson’s “unisonance” seems less than ideal in its effacement of almost all individual experience beyond simultaneous collective behavior. Similarly, Anderson’s tendency to think political community as a united and uniform whole leads him to downplay the exclusion and aggressive self-preservation that also characterizes nationalism. He argues that nations inspire unconditional and self-sacrificing love through

metaphors of family and home that adorn it with a “halo of disinterestedness” (143). In a highly problematic chapter entitled “Patriotism and Racism,” Anderson curiously denies what has been described as the “near pathological character of nationalism,” in favor of an idealistic view founded on brotherhood and love: “The cultural products of nationalism—poetry, prose fiction, music, plastic arts—show this love very clearly in thousands of different forms and styles. On the other hand, how truly rare it is to find *analogous* national products expressing fear and loathing” (141-142). Yet, nationalist poetry can glorify bloody battles against foreign or internal enemies, and music can serve as catchy packaging for fascist ideology. Most national anthems express love immediately in terms of armed defense and protection *from* an enemy, sometimes with explicit images of violence and bloodshed. Dying for one’s cherished land is presented as beautiful and necessary, but it is just as important to nourish that land with the “sang impur”²⁷ of abstract or concrete enemies, tyrants or traitors. It does not seem like the love-inspiring nation can be separated from the nation-as-exclusion.

A more complete view of community must take into account these relationships with both the individual and the excluded. We need to keep in mind that the sharing or identification constituting a community can only be experienced individually, and that the “representative” individual also remains a source of internal difference within any group. Literature does normalize, but it also simultaneously projects an unassimilable individual dimension.

²⁷ One example among many: “Aux armes, citoyens, Formez vos bataillons, Marchons, marchons! Qu’un sang impur Abreuve nos sillons!”

Furthermore, the values forming the foundation of communal bonds are often constructed in distinction or opposition to something or someone else, whether an oppressive force or excluded other. Literature also (explicitly or implicitly) plays a role in this constitutive process not just through possession, but also through exclusion²⁸ and through the sublimation of conflictual divisions in a turn toward the universal.

These two elements of community which Anderson does not elaborate on, the relationships with the individual and with the outside, form the basis of a more recent study of the literary imagination's ties to political community: Martha Nussbaum's *Poetic Justice*. Nussbaum argues that literary thinking ought to supplement calculating economic reasoning in public discourse, policy, legislation and justice.

[...] in its determination to see only what can enter into utilitarian calculations, the economic mind is blind: blind to the qualitative richness of the perceptible world; to the separateness of its people, to their inner depths, their hopes and loves and fears; blind to what it is like to live a human life and to try to endow it with a human meaning. Blind, above all, to the fact that human life is something mysterious and extremely complicated, something that demands to be approached with faculties of mind and resources of language that are suited to the expression of that complexity. (26-27)

For Nussbaum, the appropriate mode of expression for this human complexity is literature. (Certain) literary works provide the necessary vision and moral education required to guide emotions and thoughts beyond simplistic utilitarian ideology. Nussbaum's claim begins from the premise that

²⁸ On the consolidation of Western cultures partly through the exclusion of colonized others and the presence of this phenomenon in canonical Western literature, see Edward Said's *Culture and Imperialism*.

community is exclusive, that “society inhibits our compassion for people of different race, gender, or sexuality” by encouraging the refusal of empathy and compassion with individuals outside of a particular group (11). She explains that “group hatred and the oppression of groups is very often based on a failure to individualize. Racism, sexism, and many other forms of pernicious prejudice frequently ground themselves in the attribution of negative characteristics to the entire group” (92). While she does concede that some literary works contribute to maintaining prejudice and oppression, Nussbaum’s main argument is that “literary understanding [...] promotes habits of mind that lead toward social equality in that they contribute to the dismantling of the stereotypes that support group hatred” (92). Literature does this by allowing readers to enter the lives of others—not just, as Anderson had described, the lives of similar, representative citizens, but also the lives of distant and excluded others living within and across national boundaries.

For Nussbaum, then, the novelistic genre inherently promotes empathy and identification with individuals very different from ourselves. Its commitment to individuality through detailed attention to the experiences of separate characters is the very trait that promotes community in real life and can help overcome various forms of exclusion. Novels develop ethical skills by prompting readers to wonder about the ways others live and imagine living a different life themselves.

[...] good literature is disturbing in a way that history and social science writing frequently are not. Because it summons powerful emotions, it disconcerts and puzzles. It inspires distrust of conventional pieties and exacts a frequently painful

confrontation with one's own thoughts and intentions. One may be told many things about people in one's own society and yet keep that knowledge at a distance. Literary works that promote identification and emotional reaction cut through those self-protective stratagems, requiring us to see and to respond to many things that may be difficult to confront – and they make this process palatable by giving us pleasure in the very act of confrontation. (5-6)

Literature's commitment to emotion and individuality, both central for Nussbaum, requires some additional explanation. It is important to note that Nussbaum is speaking quite explicitly of *certain* individuals with *certain* relationships to the dominant and marginalized communities of society. Through the eyes of such individuals, the reader no longer sees the group as homogenous or foreign. Since readers would integrate abstract ideas about groups with much more difficulty, characters and emotional content allow them to relate, packaging social ideas in a way that penetrates through ideological resistance. The reader simultaneously observes the numerous hopes, fears and loves she shares with the character(s), perceives differences between privileged and oppressed characters (and her own status) in terms of individually lived experiences, and begins to understand the cultural institutions and mechanisms molding those experiences. In short, the reader receives a *sociopolitical and moral education* by simply being put in the situation of examining and understanding the circumstances affecting another life. Nussbaum writes that is it important "to extend this literary understanding by seeking out literary experiences in which we do identify sympathetically with individual members of marginalized or oppressed groups within our own society, learning both to see the world, for a time, through

their eyes and then reflecting as spectators on the meaning of what we have seen” (92). These novels then, are as much about categories of class or race or sexuality in general as they are about individual characters. While Anderson describes a political dimension of literature that connects readers to other readers through a community of possession, Nussbaum's politics is located in the space between reader, individual character and community that literature explicitly or implicitly bridges. And in looking at the individual, she shows how literature is in dialogue with the universal and other forms of community beyond and besides the nation. Despite the title of her work, however, Nussbaum does not examine poetry or poetic language, and even suggests that its distance from narrative makes it less able to create empathy. This attitude seems very close to the belief in incompatibility that I discussed at length in Chapter 1. In what follows, I offer a couple of examples of the politics of poems that work to express or create community. They do this both through the idea of shared “possessions” and through the empathy created not just as a result of the window into another’s experiences and thoughts, but also owing to poetic form.

2.2—Negotiating Negritude's Poetic Values:
Aimé Césaire's "Réponse à Depestre"

In their detailed studies of the development of black literature and literary criticism in 20th century, both Locha Mateso and Bernard Mouralis discuss the crucial role literary journals played in defining and tackling the goals of the Négritude movement. Continuing in the footsteps of the Harlem Renaissance, intellectuals from all over the globe sought to develop a positive description of a Black essence and were united in their common struggle against continuing French imperialism and cultural domination. Journals such as *La Revue du monde noir*, *Légitime défense*, *L'Étudiant noir*, *Tropiques* reflected a variety of aesthetic and ideological positions, but also a commitment to the common project of ending colonization, redefining blackness and achieving racial equality. Thus, through a process similar to the formation of the imagined national community, these journals fostered a collective exploration of the possibility of political emancipation through cultural production. Founded in 1947, the journal *Présence africaine* in particular became

un incomparable lieu d'échanges et de rencontres [...] carrefour et tribune où se sont exprimés les principaux courants du monde noir, *Présence Africaine* se trouve en outre, être à l'origine directe du Premier Congrès international des écrivains et artistes noirs qui devait se tenir à Paris en 1956 et apparaître alors comme un événement particulièrement important, un "Bandoung culturel." (Mouralis 419-420)

an incomparable space of exchanges and encounters [...] crossroads and platform where the principal currents of thought of the black world were expressed, *Présence Africaine* is additionally at the root of the first international Congress of Black Writers and Artists that would take place in 1956 and

appear to be a particularly important event, a “cultural Bandung.”

Under the direction of Alioune Diop, the journal presented itself, on the one hand, as a politically neutral publication (“Cette revue ne se place sous l’obédience d’aucune idéologie philosophique ou politique”; “This journal does not position itself under any ideological, philosophical or political persuasion”), and on the other, as committed to a politics of racial advancement: “Elle veut s’ouvrir à la collaboration de tous les hommes de bonne volonté (blancs, jaunes ou noirs), susceptibles de nous aider à définir l’originalité africaine et de hâter son insertion dans le monde modern.” In the midst of multiple armed struggles for independence throughout the French Empire, *Présence africaine* addressed the roles writers and artists could play in advancing the decolonization process. One of the most important moments in the development of the journal, and of the Négritude movement itself, was a polemic debate regarding the relationships between politics and poetry, sparked by an exchange involving René Depestre and Aimé Césaire.

In June of 1955, a scandalous letter by René Depestre was published on the front page of *Les Lettres françaises*. Writing to Charles Dobzynski, Depestre enthusiastically praised Louis Aragon’s *Journal d’une poésie nationale* and expressed his commitment to finding ways to eliminate “formal individualism” from his own poetic writings. He proclaimed that he had “théoriquement rallié aux enseignements décisifs d’Aragon,” and was deeply interested in adapting Aragon’s call for a renaissance of traditional French

forms in view of a Haitian socialist realism.²⁹ A semantic field of light permeates the letter (“lumière nationale,” “Aragon éclaire de son génie,” “éclairer leur chemin en appliquant la méthode d’Aragon”), giving the impression of an uncritical acceptance of a new enlightenment emanating from France (“national light,” “Aragon’s genius sheds light on,” “shed light on their path by applying Aragon’s method”). This is how the letter is most often read by critics, and how Aimé Césaire seems to have read it at the time, responding in turn to Depestre’s “assimilationism” and “formalism” with his famous poem, “Réponse à Depestre, poète haïtien (Éléments d’un art poétique).”³⁰

In the year following Depestre’s letter, an intense collective reflection by several anticolonial authors (Césaire, Senghor, Morisseau-Leroy, Gilbert Gratiant, David Diop and others) on the political dimensions of poetry unfolded in the pages of *Présence africaine* and *Optique*. At the core of this *Débat sur la poésie nationale* was the question of the political implications of poetic form and content, going far beyond Aragon’s prescriptions for a “national poetry” in the Hexagon. While much of this material is quite dated, the debate is an important part of the history of the Négritude movement, offering its members “l’occasion d’un rapprochement sans précédent” (“the occasion without precedent for us to come closer together”; Depestre, “Alioune Diop”). These articles reflected on the specificities of colonized poetic writing

²⁹ For representative explanations of Aragon’s conception of national poetry, see *Journal* p. 31-35, p. 51 and p. 72.

³⁰ See James Clifford, *The Predicament of culture*, p. 180 or Matthew Arnold, *Modernism and Négritude*, p. 183. For a more contextualized reading and a good summary of the exchange between Depestre and Césaire, see Maryse Condé, “Fous-t’en Depestre, laisse dire Aragon.”

and issues such as responsibility and authenticity long before these became trademarks of postcolonial criticism. Moreover, they provide a clear example of collective negotiation of poetico-political principles.

As Mouralis observes in *Littérature et développement*, Depestre's letter was also motivated by Aragon's absence of any thought to the situation of black Francophone poets in his articles on national poetry – this despite the fact that “black” poetry was already popular in France by that time due to Léopold Sédar Senghor's anthology (435). Depestre's appreciation of Aragon's theses is thus doubled by a desire to *supplement* them. His letter suggests that French forms would be insufficient for the expression of Haiti's particular cultural situation and that:

ce serait une erreur de notre part, un démenti de la *nationalité*, que d'ignorer le volet *africain* qui figure à la fenêtre de nos traditions nationales. Cette présence de l'Afrique, du rythme africain, dans toutes les manifestations de notre sensibilité artistique, doit déterminer dans une grande mesure les formes auxquelles nous avons recours pour exalter la vie de notre peuple, ses combats et ses espoirs.

it is a mistake on our part, a denial of *nationality*, to ignore the *African* component which appears at the window of our national traditions. This presence of Africa, the African rhythm, in all manifestations of our artistic sensibility, must determine to a large extent the forms that we use to exalt the life of our people, their struggles and hopes.

As we can see here, despite the overall tone of the letter and the adoption of programmatic terminology borrowed from Aragon, Depestre's position cannot be reduced to “ready compliance with the Communist Party's decree against surrealism,” as Benita Parry has claimed (47). Rather, it is a rough, initial attempt to sketch out a possible poetic *synthesis* between

socialist realism and the plural cultural traditions Depestre views as specific to Haiti. Such a synthesis bears the marks of a disenchantment with the Indigenist movement and a skepticism of Négritude.³¹ These movements, in Depestre's view, perpetuate racial mystifications that do not adequately account for class inequalities and can become politically oppressive rather than liberating.

While Depestre's theoretical position is in many ways the closest to contemporary postcolonial thought, it is above all Césaire's poetic "Réponse" that has repeatedly captured the attention of critics. Although certainly less 'opaque' than many of his other works, the poem has yielded no shortage of contradictory interpretations. These include that the poem is proof of Césaire's defense of an "individual creative expression" (Jules-Rosette, 208) or, on the contrary, that Césaire sought to "define the parameters of valid poetic discourse within the Francophone black diaspora" (Nesbitt, 109); that the poem is an affirmation of Négritude (Parry) or, rather, that it provides an example of hybridity or *métissage* (Clifford, Monroe). My reading accounts for the ways in which the poem maintains a tension between these opposing interpretations. By examining its key moments, I show that it is paradoxically a call to order within a call to freedom.

The title of Césaire's poem, "Réponse à Depestre poète haïtien (Éléments d'un art poétique)" addresses an 'open letter' to Depestre. The

³¹ In *Shaping and Re-shaping the Caribbean*, Martin Munro provides an important historical and literary genealogy for Depestre's wariness of Négritude and preference for Marxist thought (141-158). Depestre's brief turn toward a "national poetry" that I am describing here also builds on similarities between post-Vichy France and Haiti after the American occupation, as Maryse Condé has noted (180).

emphasis of “poète haïtien” not only ironically echoes Depestre’s privileging of national background, as opposed to black, African or Caribbean identifications, but also invites him to remember proudly that the poet’s native land of Haïti is where “la négritude se mit debout pour la première fois” (“*négritude* first stood up”; Césaire, *Cahier*, 46). Furthermore, the parenthetical subtitle announces a fragmentary *ars poetica* to counter Aragon’s program in the *Journal d’une poésie nationale*: this poem will also be a lesson on poetry as such.

*C’est une nuit de Seine
et moi je me souviens comme ivre
du chant dément de Boukman accouchant ton pays
aux forceps de l’orage*

It is a Seine night
and I, I remember as if drunk
the insane song of Boukman delivering your country
with the forceps of the storm

The site of Césaire’s speech requires some reconstruction. The very first line, “C’est une nuit de Seine,” introduces a shared situation of exile, reinforced by the poem’s final lines “Depestre/de la Seine je t’envoie au Brésil mon salut.” Moreover, the initial association of “nuit de Seine,” “je me souviens,” and “ivre” seem to launch the poem with melancholic, Apollinarian echos, before shifting abruptly to different scene. The first line simultaneously transports us to the Kingdom of Sine, through Senghor’s “Nuit de Sine.” In her commentary of Senghor’s poem, Voichita-Maria Sasu explains that “Sine est le nom d’un des anciens royaumes sérères, [...] avant la conquête coloniale, et qui devient, pour Senghor, son ‘royaume d’enfance’” (21). Senghor dwells on the

themes of exile and the responsibility of remembrance, as well as motifs of racially shared song, rhythm, and blood:

Qu'il nous berce, le silence rythmé.
Écoutons son chant, écoutons battre notre sang sombre,
écoutons
Battre le poulx profond de l'Afrique dans la brume des villages
perdus.
[...]
Écoutons la voix des Anciens d'Élissa. Comme nous exilés
Ils n'ont pas voulu mourir, que se perdit par les sables leur
torrent séminal.

In this light, what Césaire is remembering in the first stanza of the “Réponse” (the “chant dément de Boukmann accouchant ton pays/aux forceps de l'orage”), is perhaps as much the legendary voodoo ceremony from Haiti's revolutionary past, as it is an ancestral African song *within* Boukmann's “chant dément.” Césaire thus doubles the chant giving birth (“accou**chant**”) to Depestre's homeland with its African origins. Furthermore, as Martin Munro explains, the “images of traumatic birth seem to invoke the traditional idea of Haiti as the ‘berceau de l'homme noir’” (161). Depestre is called on to live up to this exemplary role.

DEPESTRE

*Vaillant cavalier du tam-tam
est-il vrai que tu doutes de la forêt natale
de nos voix rauques de nos cœurs qui nous remontent amers
de nos yeux de rhum rouge de nos fruits incendiés
se peut-il
que les pluies de l'exil
aient détendu la peau de tambour de ta voix*

DEPESTRE

Courageous tom-tom rider
is it true that you doubt of the native forest

of our hoarse voices of our hearts coming back to us bitter
of our rum red eyes of our burned down fruits
can it be
that the rains of exile
have slackened the drum skin of your voice

In this second stanza, following the awakening force of the interpellation in capital letters, Césaire addresses Depestre with a critical reformulation of Depestre's own phrase, "vaillant secrétaire de la colombe," designating Maurice Thorez in a poem from *Végétations de clarté*. Césaire's rhetorical questions then ask whether Depestre has not turned away from his intertwined African and Haitian origins, and from the kind of "common ethnic rhythmicity" they supposedly demand (Munro 161). These lines remind Depestre of his native land, of the "forêt natale," of colonial violence, strongly implying that the author has a responsibility to keeping his (black) ancestors' voices alive through his poetry. The responsibility toward the black "nous" is constructed in opposition to a refusal of the racial and cultural other. Césaire valorizes "nos voix rauques" and "les mauvaises manières de notre sang" against "leur sang à menuets", the diluted rhythm of "l'eau fade dégoulinant," and "les grognements des maîtres d'école":

*Laisse-là Depestre laisse-là
la gueuserie solennelle d'un air mendié
laisse-leur
le ronron de leur sang à menuets l'eau fade dégoulinant
le long des marches roses
et pour les grognements des maîtres d'école
assez*

*marronnons-les Depestre marronnons-les
comme jadis nous marronnions nos maîtres à fouet
[...]*

*C'est vrai ils arrondissent cette saison des sonnets
pour nous à le faire cela me rappellerait par trop
le jus sucré que bavent là-bas les distilleries des mornes
quand les lents bœufs maigres font leur rond au zonzon des
moustiques*

*Ouiche ! Depestre le poème n'est pas un moulin à
passer de la canne à sucre ça non
et si les rimes sont mouches sur les mares
sans rimes*

*toute une saison
loin des mares
moi te faisant raison
rions buvons et marronnons
[...]
et pour le reste
que le poème tourne bien où mal sur l'huile de ses gonds
fous-t-en Depestre fous-t-en laisse dire Aragon*

*Drop it Depestre drop it
the solemn wretchedness of a begged air
leave to them
the humming of their minuet blood the bland water dripping
along pink stairs
and as for the grumbling of schoolteachers
enough*

*let's maroon them Depestre let's maroon them
as we used to maroon our masters with whips
[...]*

*It is true they're smoothing out sonnets this season
were we to do this it would remind me too much
of the sugary juice drooled over there by the distilleries in the
mornes
when the slow skinny oxen make their rounds to the buzzing of
mosquitoes*

*Bah! Depestre the poem is not a mill for
grinding sugar cane surely not
and if rhymes be flies on ponds
without rhymes*

*a whole season
far from the ponds*

I toast to you

let's laugh drink and maroon
 [...]

as for the rest

whether the poem turns well or poorly on the grease of its hinges
 don't care Depestre don't care let Aragon talk

The polemic repetition of “laisse” in response to Depestre’s letter insistently urges the poet not to dwell in the poverty of borrowed song and unoriginal airs dressed up in grandiose forms. Here, the “maîtres d’école” correspond to the historical “maîtres à fouet,” both implicitly linked to the caporal constraints of poetic *mètre*: community in anti-colonial rebellion thus translates into a racialized aesthetic community whose “authentic” expression can only be found in free verse.

Césaire’s prescription of free verse can be read from several perspectives. First, it stems from a core principle of Négritude ideology. Munro explains that in these middle stanzas, “the notion of ‘notre sang’ clearly reinforces Césaire’s conception of a shared Africanized essence which, in this case, is an anti-rational force, an unpredictable ‘bourrasque’ which undermines order and reason” (161). Free verse is thus presented as the ‘appropriate’ form of expression of a “black irrational other to (European) reason” (161). From this perspective, the often-cited imperative, “marronnons-les Depestre marronnons-les/comme jadis nous marronnions nos maîtres à fouet,” demands a double movement, away from a specific “they” *and* toward a specific “us.” Moreover, the verb “marronner” is conjugated in the first person plural everywhere in the poem, precluding any simplification that would

equate it entirely with the expression of *individual* artistic freedom.³²

A close look at these stanzas reveals another intertextual detour, this time via Aragon's text. In *Journal d'une poésie nationale*, we read that poetic experimentation beginning with Rimbaud distanced itself from the "ronron regulier" of traditional verse and prevented French poetry from sinking into "des marais sonores et machinaux" (32). Aragon's concession concludes that this is a valuable part of French literary history, but that there is nothing intrinsically stifling about fixed forms. Rather, forms like the sonnet are a "machine à penser" that can be renewed through a contemporary realist vision (66). Césaire seizes upon these terms directly and through a network of sounds, especially the nasal "o". The "**ronron** de leur sang à menuets" leads to formalism ("ils **arrondissent**/ cette saison des **sonnets**") and saccharine or dehumanized productions ("le jus sucré que bavent là-bas les distilleries des mornes/ quand les lents bœufs maigres **font** leur **rond** au **zonzon** des moustiques"). Césaire insists on a rejection of formal restrictions while at the same relying on the greatest intensity of alliteration and internal rhyme to build to the climax of his poem, in which the mechanical term "**gonds**" is echoed in **Aragon's** name. Maryse Condé has argued that, through Depestre,

³² In *Black Paris*, Bennetta Jules-Rosette claims that "The neologism [*marronnons*] is part of Césaire's larger argument that poetry, no matter what its national origin, should be a form of individual creative expression. [...] According to Césaire, no particular African or Antillean form of expression should characterize poetry. Poets should use all the tools and techniques available to recount their experiences" (108). As I explain in the following section of this chapter, this in fact corresponds with Depestre's position, more clearly articulated in his essay "Réponse à Césaire." Contrary to Jules-Rosette's interpretation, Césaire is quite explicitly against such a "universal poetry," and implicitly limits the possibilities of "individual creative expression" insofar as it must necessarily be inscribed within a pan-African history and rhythmicity. For a compelling analysis of the differences between Césaire and Depestre regarding the ideological and aesthetic principles of Negritude, see Munro's *Shaping and Reshaping the Caribbean*.

Césaire meant to attack the communist party, foreshadowing his famous letter to Maurice Thorez (180). It is interesting to note, in this respect, the direct engagement with Aragon's thought in the poem and the rhyme play with his name (marronnons/Aragon). Our verb "marronnons" is thus also *poetically* directed at Aragon, against the *Journal's* mechanistic understanding of poetic creation and largely technical appreciation and evaluation of poetic works.

In the visual center of the poem, we find the final appearance of "marronnons": "*moi te faisant raison/rions buvons et marronnons*". These somewhat puzzling lines have rarely been commented on, and the official translation by Eshleman and Smith settles on "under my persuasion/let's laugh drink and escape like slaves." This does not quite capture the way Césaire interweaves different meanings of the expression "faire raison à" while playing on a Rablaisian image: "moi te faisant raison" simultaneously evokes an *explanation* regarding poetic craft and an ironic *toast* to Depestre, inviting him to drink for renewed inspiration ("je me souviens comme ivre"). "Marronnons" perhaps also contains a hint of the verb "marrer," the neologism recalling a slight deformation of *marrons-nous*. Such an interpretation is supported by the line "rions buvons et marronnons," as well as by the playful typography and rhyme in this section of the poem. We should remember that Césaire's stance also draws on the post-Romantic analogy between free verse and political emancipation, as well as the tenets of Surrealism. Later in the poem, we find the appearance of a strong "I," as Césaire claims that dwelling theoretically on the relationships between form, content, and revolution

detracts from observing the world and cultivating poetic novelty: “je ne me charge pas du rapport/ j’aime mieux regarder le printemps.”As a result of these overlapping levels of meaning, “marronnons” becomes both an imperative to liberate poetic creation from the cultural and ideological continuations of slavery, and an appeal to create *together* in the memory of a common historical past. However, there remains an element of gratuitous mirth embedded in the image.

The closing lines of “Réponse à Depestre” are almost as often cited as Césaire’s “marronnons-les,” (and most often from the final version of the poem in *Noria*, rather than the original). James Clifford notes that these lines are “scattered with words and place names from West Africa, France, Hispanic America, Brazil, Haiti. Césaire veers among the traditions that history has offered to and imposed on a Caribbean identity” (181). He goes on to turn Césaire’s imperative into a slogan for our time: “We still need a *verb marronner*” (ibid.). Along similar lines, Jonathan Monroe concludes that the “hybrid speech” of Césaire’s poem “anticipates the shift of emphasis from *négritude* to *métissage*” (297). And on a more neutral note, Thomas Hale has suggested that Césaire’s additions to the original version of the poem are “précisions à la référence aux dieux et diables afro-brésiliens” and that they “témoignent de l’approfondissement de ses connaissances en culture afro-brésilienne après son voyage au Brésil en 1963” (354).

However, these readings might result from a superficial impression created by the text. A closer look at both versions suggests that Césaire was

already quite familiar with Afro-Brazilian culture when he first wrote “Réponse à Depestre,” and that the words and place names he added in the second version are neither strung together in celebration of Caribbean diversity or hybridity, nor extraneous ethnographic elaborations. Rather, as I discuss in a moment, these additions are most likely for poetic and ideological emphasis.

For comparison, here are the two versions of the final lines:

*de la Seine je t'envoie au Brésil mon salut
à toi à Bahia à tous les saints à tous les diables
à ceux des favellas*

*Bombaïa Bombaïa
crois-m-en comme jadis bats-nous le bon tam-tam
éclaboussant leur nuit rance
d'un rut sommaire d'astres moudangs. (1955)*

*de la Seine je t'envoie au Brésil mon salut
à toi à Bahia à tous les saints à tous les diables
Cabritos cantagallo Botafogo
bate
batuque
à ceux des favellas*

*Depestre
bombaïa bombaïa
crois-m-en comme jadis bats-nous le bon tam-tam
éclaboussant leur nuit rance
d'un rut sommaire d'astres moudangs. (1984)*

In the lines “à toi à Bahia à tous les saints à tous les diables/à ceux des favellas,” Césaire is most likely not referencing Depestre’s location. As he indicates in *Le Métier à Métisser*, Depestre was living in São Paulo, in a completely different part of the country. Césaire plays with the name of Baía de Todos os Santos, a port in the state of Bahia which was central for Brazil’s slave trade. Bahia’s history is punctuated by frequent and important slave revolts (especially during the early 19th century), most notably the Malê Revolt

of 1835, the second largest slave rebellion after the Haitian Revolution (Barbosa-Nunes 649).³³ Bahia was also the site of numerous maroon communities called *quilombos* (Genovese, 30-31). After the abolition of slavery, *favelas*, many of which had begun as *quilombos*, became the modern continuation of these peripheral communities of former slaves (Graden 224; Carril 230).³⁴ Césaire’s references to Bahia and the *favelas*, then, fall into the same semantic field of *marronnage*. His conclusion goes on to phonically interweave Bahia’s and Haiti’s revolutionary pasts through the rallying cry “Bombaïa Bombaïa.”³⁵

To this rich historical context, the final version of the poem, “Le verbe marronner,” adds the lines “Cabritos cantagallo Botafogo/ bate/ batuque.” *Cabritos* playfully refers to rebellious youngsters and young mulattos or Negros³⁶; Cantagallo and Botafogo are indeed places in Brazil, as some critics have pointed out, but they are also quite clearly calls to *sing out* and *set fire* (as maroons used to burn plantations). Finally, “batuque” once again evokes a fusion of art and resistance, designating kinds of music, dance, and fighting, the rhythms of which originate in Africa. The fragments of Césaire’s poetic

³³ In his account of the Malê Revolt, Eugene Genovese explains that “Bahia had come close to becoming another Haiti” (32). The comparison between Bahia and Haiti is quite commonplace. For a detailed account of the Malê Revolt, see João Reis’s *Slave Rebellion in Brazil*.

³⁴ The term *favela* itself originates with the Morro da Favela, a hill near Antônio Conselheiro’s famous Canudos community in Bahia, which was composed in large part of maroons and freed slaves (Da Cunha 48; Graden 216). In just a few years, this community had become the second largest ‘city’ in the state. Fearing unrest, the Brazilian government, after several failed attempts, destroyed the settlement and killed its twenty five thousand inhabitants in 1897.

³⁵ Eshleman and Smith note that this is a “Haitian rallying cry associated with Boukman’s voodoo ceremonies at the Bois Cayman on the eve of the 1791 revolts” (407).

³⁶ Cabrito is also the name of the Bahian town that was to be the meeting place of the Malê rebels.

vision are captured quite succinctly in these words, as he repeats the necessity of maintaining a continuity between contemporary Black poetic creation, African sources and maroon revolt.

Even without knowing the meanings of these words, however, one can remark the almost onomatopoeic echo Césaire has inserted: **Botafogo-bate-batuque-bats**. Through these additions, he has also intensified the rhythmic effect of the conclusion as a whole (the assonance with “a,” including the repeated preposition “à,” and the alliterative sequences with “b,” “c,” “s,” and “t”). The sounds here initially seem to overwhelm meaning, not only because these words might be foreign to a Francophone reader, but also because they are syntactically disjointed, each one adding a few beats that build towards the ‘envoi.’ The final imperative, “bats-nous le bon tam-tam,” ironically nestled into the second hemistich of an alexandrine, breaks away into free verse again as Africa takes the last word³⁷. The opposition between reason and irrationality returns in this concluding moment: while Aragon had been associated with a poem’s mechanisms through the term “gonds,” here the repetition of Depestre’s name resonates with “d’astres” amid the erotic spirituality of the last line.

All of these terms have a disorienting effect, tempting the reader to view them through the lens of hybridity (Clifford, Monroe). However, the final lines of the poem seem tied to the same double movement I pointed out earlier: the

³⁷ Eshleman and Smith explain that “moudangs” is possibly a variation of names of African people in Cameroon and Chad – “Mondongue” or “Moudongue” – or of a family of peoples in West Africa: “Mandingue” (407).

imperative of Black poetic revolt informed by an allegiance to the memory of slave rebellion. In “Réponse à Depestre,” the Black essence captured in the image of the *tam-tam* indeed transcends nations and languages; however, it never becomes trans-racial, and it is consistently incompatible with the stifling “White” forms of the sonnet and the Revolution. These lines, just like the rest of the poem, certainly draw upon the geographical displacements imposed by slavery or exile, but they also remain rooted in *négritude* ideology. Indeed, Césaire’s *Lettre à Maurice Thorez* would shortly afterward denounce the Communist Party’s belief in the “supériorité omnilatérale de l’Occident” and its “paternalisme colonialiste,” announcing that “l’heure est venue d’abandonner toutes les vieilles routes [...] L’heure de nous mêmes a sonné.”

We should note, however, that Césaire’s significant revisions make the final version of the poem somewhat less pointed. This may be one reason that critics discussing the 1956 debate but working only from the later text might arrive at such different interpretations from the ones I have presented here. Although the final revised title, “Le verbe marronner/ à Depestre, poète haïtien,” retains some of the didactic force of the original title by relying on a pedagogical syntagma, and is still similarly directed at Depestre, the poem no longer presents itself as a rebuttal within a specific situation. Césaire deletes the “Laisse-là Depestre laisse-là [...]” stanza I quoted earlier, replacing these polemic lines with “marronnerons-nous Depestre marronnerons-nous?” Rather than being an imperative to revolt against a specific “them”, this question opens onto an uncertain future. The gesture of *marronnage* now

risks being deferred indefinitely as a poetico-political ideal. This new phrasing might also be a conciliatory turn towards Depestre's vision. Césaire furthermore removes the lines "*et pour le reste/ que le poème tourne bien où mal sur l'huile de ses gonds/ fous-t-en Depestre fous-t-en laisse dire Aragon.*" While the ideological substrate of the poem and many of the initial references persist, we can see that the "us"/ "they" dichotomy is diffused to some extent.³⁸

In re-reading Césaire's poem, we can see the important differences in ideological beliefs dividing him from Depestre. Martin Munro is right to note that while Césaire speaks of the "peau de tambour de ta voix" and the "bon tam-tam," the "the notion of 'black' rhythms to Depestre at this time was closely connected with the sort of racial essentialism he found so unacceptable in Négritude, and which had been taken to its political extreme in the tragedy of Duvalier's Haiti" (165). While Depestre accepts the idea of an African heritage manifesting itself through various cultural elements, he insists that differing historical circumstances created a plurality of Black cultures with a range of linguistic, social and economic characteristics. He offers a compelling critique of *négritude*, in response to the prescriptive voices leveled against him (including Césaire's) in *Présence africaine*, writing:

Hors de cette lumière nationale-là nous risquons de tomber dans le panneau de la "négritude" qui nie l'évidence de la diversité des conditions matérielles d'évolution, qui considère la sensibilité créatrice des noirs, comme un bloc culturel homogène, sans frontières, interchangeable dans ses manifestations expressives. Et parler de la "*poésie noire*" est un mythe aussi confus que la

³⁸ Thomas Hale correctly remarks that "dans l'ensemble, les modifications apportées à la dernière version adoucissent légèrement le ton critique du poème et reflètent, en général, une tendance de la part de Césaire à diminuer les barrières entre lui et les communistes, tant sur le plan artistique que sur le plan politique, depuis les années soixante" (254).

notion métaphysique de négritude. C'est négliger l'importance des nouveaux rapports de classes qui depuis la traite et depuis l'abolition de l'esclavage se sont constitués dans chacun de nos pays. C'est oublier que l'héritage africain, à la suite d'une longue cohabitation avec des éléments culturels venus d'Europe et des U.S.A. a permis que s'élabore, sur une base économique nouvelle, une formation psychique distincte dans ses traits, à la fois de l'Afrique, de l'Europe et des U.S.A. [...] *La communauté de culture ne peut apparaître en l'absence des communautés de territoire, de langue, de vie économique et de formation psychique.* (45)

Beyond this national light, we risk falling into "negritude," which denies the evident diversity of material conditions of development, considering the creative sensibility of blacks as a homogenous, borderless cultural block, interchangeable in its expressive manifestations. And to speak of "*black poetry*" is as muddled a myth as the metaphysical notion of negritude. It means neglecting the importance of new class relations that have formed in each of our countries since the slave trade and the abolition of slavery. It means forgetting that an African heritage, as a result of a long cohabitation with cultural elements from Europe and the U.S.A., has allowed the elaboration of a psychological formation distinct from Africa, Europe, and the U.S.A. upon a new economic foundation. [...] *Community of culture cannot appear in the absence of territorial, linguistic, and psychological community.*

In this instance, he stops short of claiming that "culture" in itself might be heterogeneous: he still has recourse to units such as Africa, Europe and the U.S.A. However, it is clear that Depestre refuses the exclusively racial terms framing the debate on national poetry and, more generally, dismisses the mystifying aspects of a unified Black essence that would transcend the frontiers of language, class and nation. Instead, he argues that oppression does not follow clear-cut racial lines and prefers to view Haiti and other post-colonial nations as cultural crossroads. He also frees culture from tradition, insisting instead on the mobility and malleability of cultural elements that are

not the possessions of any one land. Thus, reminding Césaire that his “rions buvons et marronnons” would not be possible without the “don humaniste” of Rabelais, Depestre argues that French authors, just as the French language, can be transformed into Haitian “*biens nationaux* repris par le peuple pour de meilleurs emplois” (“*national resources* reclaimed by the people for better uses”; 56, 49). Depestre’s conception of the post-colonial, national intellectual seems to comprise a necessarily international dimension and a remarkable resistance towards different forms of essentialization. As we shall see in chapter four, his work exemplifies the quest for what Homi Bhabha has called a “national, anti-nationalist history of the ‘people’” (56).

2.3—*Poetic Performance as Political Event: Québec's First Nuit de la poésie*

With the death of Maurice Duplessis in 1959, Québec entered a period of rapid urbanization, industrialization and secularization. Known as the Quiet Revolution, the 1960s and 1970s were also characterized by the formation of powerful nationalist and separatist movements that opposed the sociopolitical and economic domination of Anglophone North America. The word “quiet,” *tranquille*, is somewhat misleading, especially since the social struggles of the time also involved important protests and violence. In the seven years leading up to 1970, the extreme separatist party Front de libération du Québec (FLQ) was responsible for nearly 200 violent crimes, including bombings and murders (“La naissance du FLQ”). The province’s political unrest reached a climax in October 1970, when the FLQ kidnapped British diplomat James Cross and Québec Labour Minister Pierre Laporte. In response to the abductions and fearing a larger insurrection, Pierre Trudeau invoked the War Measures Act (the only time it was ever used in Canadian history). Canadian armed forces entered Québec, and police conducted hundreds of arrests. Numerous members of the independentist intelligentsia, including several poets involved in the *Nuit de la poésie* earlier that year, were among those detained.

On the eve of March 27, 1970, at the height of the Quiet Revolution and just months before the October Crisis, sixty poets gathered at Montreal’s Theatre Gesù to perform their work before thousands of spectators. In Québec, the importance of this first *Nuit de la poésie* is constantly reaffirmed. “La plus

grande fête de la Parole qui ait jamais eu lieu au Québec” was conceived by Jean-Claude Labrecque and Jean-Pierre Masse in order to be filmed and distributed as an “anthologie visuelle et sonore de la poésie québécoise” (“The greatest celebration of the Word ever to take place in Québec”; “audio-visual anthology of Québécois poetry” ; *La Nuit de la poésie*; “Les premières nuits”). The performances thus disseminated and immortalized are still of interest for us today, not only because they have become part of Québec’s literary canon, but also because they incite us, in an explicit manner, to question the terms of the supposed incompatibility between politics and literature.

Before turning to a few of the highlight performances of the *Nuit*, we can note some general ways in which this poetic spectacle reinforced and created political community. Firstly, within the context of the cultural transformations of the Quiet Revolution, the *Nuit* arose from and contributed to an emerging national heritage. In line with Anderson’s descriptions of the development of national consciousness through language, the *Nuit*’s poetic performances, infused with *joual* and popular orality, sought to define a Québécois identity, at once distinct from its French origins and in opposition to Anglophone culture. The event thus constituted a manifestation and negotiation of the values of the new political community in formation. At the same time, the poets taking part in the *Nuit de la poésie* were influenced by larger movements. They appropriated anti-colonial and civil rights discourses by Caribbean, African and African-American theoreticians and authors, as well as those of Marxism, Mai '68, and hippie culture, all transcending the

Anglophone-Francophone divide. Beyond the element of a nationalist “*défense et illustration*,” Paul Fraisse remarks in *Langue, identité et oralité dans la poésie du Québec* that “c’est avant tout l’omniprésence de modèles culturels dominants que dénoncent les poètes” (“the poets were above all denouncing the omnipresence of dominant cultural models”; 195). From this perspective, even Claude Gauvreau’s glossolalic poetry can be considered to contribute to political community in the sense that it both participates in an emerging national canon and supports the formation of a disorderly subculture by enacting and promoting resistance to traditional cultural norms.

On another level, the *Nuit de la poésie* can be thought of as a concrete example of political activism. It was a larger version of previous performances such as “Chansons et poèmes de la résistance,” which had been organized in support of political prisoners like Pierre Vallières and featured many of the same poets (Raoul Duguay, Michèle Lalonde, Gaston Miron, Paul Chamberland, etc.). Throughout the night there were lively interactions between poets and audience members, including the typical cheering and booing, but also chanting of political slogans. And in *Les archives de l’âme*, Gaston Bellemare recalls the presence of undercover police officers in the audience “pour vérifier les adhésions politiques ou les alliances, les liens entre la poésie et le FLQ de l’époque” (“to check political membership and alliances, the ties between poetry and the FLQ at the time”; Fraisse 197). The police supervision of these performances prefigures the targeted arrests of major cultural figures (including several who took part in the *Nuit*, like Gaston Miron

and Michel Garneau) during the October Crisis. The *Nuit* thus carried a strong element of political protest. This is true not only of the overall atmosphere, but also of the content and form of the performances.

Indeed some poets did not shy away from explicit political (and even insurrectional) declarations (e.g. "le FLQ me fait bander," "White French Canadian Panthers Party of Montréal", "la poésie sera totale ou elle ne sera pas," "la liberté est au bout des fusils", etc.) and themes such as consumerism, inequality, alienation, and history were frequent.³⁹ Similarly, the plural form "nous" is scattered throughout the works, and poems such as Lalonde's "Speak White" make no use of the "I" at all. In the context of live poetic performance, this "nous" is partly realized. It gestures towards community in a way that bypasses the individual empathy and identification discussed by Nussbaum and becomes the kind of properly political form of designation that Rancière refuses for literature. The theatrical element, bringing poetry from page to stage, makes poetry public in a concrete way and brings with it the possibility of affecting a crowd and rousing individuals collectively. In addition, several poems are infused with the characteristics of the manifesto genre, reflecting a consciousness of the unique community brought into being by the event.

³⁹ Fraisse notes that the organizers narrowed the spectrum of the *Nuit*'s performances, which lasted nearly 11 hours. Not only did they select the initial participants, but they also edited out much of the footage to create the 2-hour film that would make these poems known throughout Québec. Fraisse explains that the organizers cut out both the most politically extreme poems and more intimate or apolitical poems that "ne tenaient pas suffisamment compte de ce contexte politique [...] Cette non sélection qui peut s'apparenter à une forme de censure montre à quel point il y a eu de la part des réalisateurs, un certain nombre de choix artistiques visant à donner une certaine image de la poésie à partir du spectacle" ("did not sufficiently take into account the political context [...] This elimination, which can seem like a kind of censorship, shows to what extent the directors made a certain number of artistic choices aiming to give a certain image of poetry based on the performances"; 134-135).

Fraisse writes that "si les poètes ressentent aussi vivement le besoin d'avoir recours à des formes impératives, qu'ils cherchent à convaincre l'auditoire de la nécessité d'agir et de réagir, c'est qu'ils prennent pleinement conscience de la force collective qu'ils représentent en tant que communauté" ("if the poets so strongly felt the need to have recourse to imperative forms, looking to convince the audience of the necessity to act and react, it's because they were becoming fully aware of the collective force they represented as a community"; 216).

Although, the *Nuit's* poetry often did not reflect a commitment to any political party, many of the performances and the overall atmosphere of the event, that of a "Woodstock poétique," broke the fourth wall and sought to inspire activism (Gasquy-Resch 197). They involved the audience in a shared creative experience, sometimes without any unitary cause beyond a vague humanism. Gaston Miron declared "je suis sur la place publique avec les miens," Raoul Duguay called for everyone to be a poet, and Georges Dor threw books into the audience - such gestures work to circulate responsibility and place the audience in an active position. Of course, contemporary viewers of Labrecque and Masse's film cannot fully take part in this political dimension. But as critics, we can appreciate the fact that, although in many ways the opposite of Anderson's "unisonance," the *Nuit's* gathering created an important experience of simultaneity, concretizing an imagined political community.

At the same time, this is a community that doesn't lose sight of the

individuals that compose it. In the *Nuit*'s initial moments, an organizer calls out from the theater's roof to the crowds gathering in the darkness below:

Vous cherchez la poésie là où elle n'est pas! Elle est ici!
Qui va réciter un poème là? Qui va parler? La poésie c'est
l'expression libre! En dedans tout est arrangé, vous-autres vous
pouvez improviser! Vous avez le pouvoir d'improviser!

You're searching for poetry in the wrong place! It's here!
Who wants to recite a poem out here? Who wants to speak out?
Poetry is free expression! Inside everything is arranged; you, you
can improvise! You have the power to improvise!

This playful provocation interpellates audience members and constitutes them as a community of poetico-political subjects, each with their own creative force. The separatist and Marxist elements informing the event are thus intertwined with a quasi-anarchist insistence on spontaneity and singularity. And, as we shall see shortly in more detail, the *Nuit* is punctuated by numerous moments of individual affirmation. Duguay's "ce soir publiquement je me rebaptise," Lalonde's "je m'appelle Michèle et je vis en Amérique," Miron's "j'ai mal en chacun de nous," Chamberland's "je dis ce que je vois," Paradis's "qui est moi?" or Georges Dor's "je chante-pleure et je contre-chante"—these moments participate simultaneously in a politics of both individual empowerment and community formation. They also mobilize empathy and rely on the idea of an experience that is to some extent shared by the speaker and spectator, a sociopolitical exclusion that is turned into a common possession.

Let us now step inside Montréal's Théâtre Gésu. Two major questions implicitly echo between the lines performed by these poets: How does the

social anatomy, and its potential reformulations, depend on language? And whose language? One might begin by remarking that the evening was in many ways a performative reflection on the meaning and function of poetic language itself. From tragedy to comedy, from publicity to prayer, from music to silence, *La Nuit de la poésie* questioned the divisions between traditional literary genres and common modes of expression, and blurred the boundaries between individual and collective experience. The event demonstrated the ways in which poetic language can create a communal space of simultaneous affirmation and refusal, as well as a reflection on poetry's relations to liberty, politics, and revolt. This staging of language can be eloquently summed up in Raoul Duguay's prop: his text is written on the back of a box that had once contained a human anatomy model, whose name, capitalized in English, is "THE VISIBLE MAN." As Dugay chants⁴⁰ about life and poetry, about proletarians and women, about joy, pollution, ignorance, flowers, and famine, his audience is invited to think about the ways in which the social body is partitioned, divided, and categorized. And, to draw on Jacques Rancière's vocabulary, the present and future spectators of these counter-cultural and anti-colonial performances can begin to see the modes of visibility determining

⁴⁰ On Duguay's poetic style, Fraisse correctly remarks that "le poème de Duguay présente des similitudes avec la pratique des incantations chamaniques: la poésie de Duguay produite à cette période est en effet très influencée par divers courants mystiques et ésotériques et emprunte beaucoup au registre religieux d'une parole divine. Il y a donc dans son poème une force physique et concrète qui engage une réception physique de la part du public, qui se retrouve ainsi sollicité par la dimension matérielle du son" ("Duguay's poem is similar to the practice of shamanistic incantations: Duguay's poetry from this period is as a matter of fact influenced by various mystical and esoteric currents and borrows much from the religious register of divine speech. Therefore his poem has a concrete, physical force that draws a physical reception from the audience, finding itself solicited by the material dimension of sound"; 182).

the dominant *partage du sensible*, that is to say “l’ordre du visible et du dicible qui fait que telle activité est visible et que telle autre ne l’est pas, que telle parole est entendue comme un discours et telle autre comme du bruit” (Rancière, *La Méésentente* 52).

Michèle Lalonde’s “Speak White” addresses these concerns in the most explicit manner. Central to the *Nuit* and to the Quiet Revolution more generally, this poem was written in 1968 for the protest performances of “Chansons et poèmes de la résistance” and later posted throughout Montréal. The title, repeated throughout the poem, counter-appropriates and deconstructs what was a common insult at the time, addressed to Francophones and immigrants speaking in languages other than English. To the humiliating imperative demanding that everyone speak the language of the socioeconomically and politically dominant minority, Lalonde responds with the same command, this time making visible the structure of oppression.

 speak white
 il est si beau de vous entendre
 parler de Paradise Lost
 ou du profil gracieux et anonyme qui tremble
 dans les sonnets de Shakespeare
 nous sommes un peuple inculte et bègue
 mais ne sommes pas sourds au génie d'une langue
 [...] nous sommes un peu durs d'oreille
 nous vivons trop près des machines
 et n'entendons que notre souffle au-dessus des outils
 speak white and loud
 qu'on vous entende
 de Saint-Henri à Saint-Domingue
 oui quelle admirable langue
 pour embaucher donner des ordres
 fixer l'heure de la mort à l'ouvrage
 [...] dans la langue douce de Shakespeare
 avec l'accent de Longfellow

parlez un français pur et atrocement blanc
comme au Viêt-Nam au Congo
parlez un allemand impeccable
une étoile jaune entre les dents
parlez russe parlez rappel à l'ordre parlez répression
speak white
c'est une langue universelle
nous sommes nés pour la comprendre
avec ses mots lacrymogènes
avec ses mots matraques

speak white
it is so beautiful to hear you
speak of Paradise Lost
and of the gracious and anonymous profile that trembles
in the sonnets of Shakespeare
we are an uncultured and stammering people
but we are not deaf to the genius of a language
[...] we are a bit hard of hearing
we live too close to the machines
and only hear the sound of our breath over the tools.
speak white and loud
so that we may hear you
from Saint-Henri to Saint-Domingue
yes, what an admirable language
for hiring giving orders
setting the time for working to death
[...] in the sweet language of Shakespeare's
with the accent of Longfellow
speak a pure and atrociously white French
like in Vietnam, in the Congo
speak an impeccable German
a yellow star between your teeth
speak Russian speak call to order speak repression
speak white
it's a universal language
we were born to understand it
with its teargas words
with its baton words

The poem ironically constructs a hostile addressee “vous” that is at first implicitly Anglophone and culturally dominant. Meanwhile, the Francophone “nous” is characterized as stammering, uncultivated, and going deaf because of their proximity to factory machines. As the poem progresses, the relationship between the “nous”/“vous” is transformed from an opposition determined by local, cultural inequality, to a situation of class domination, and finally, to colonial and totalitarian repression. Lalonde displaces the “nous” and “vous” from their initial positions in order to link the struggle of Quebec’s largely Francophone proletariat to a universal struggle against all forms of oppression. A resistant “nous” is thus created that crosses national and racial frontiers, as Lalonde decodes the multiple layers of hatred mobilized by the phrase “speak white” - it becomes the language, *any language*, of violence. And the violence thematized throughout the poem is above all the systematic silencing of speech, almost every line is related to speech, and it is the “vous” who are in the position to speak properly, while the nous can only listen, appreciate, trust, or use a “langue à jurons.” The poem stages a reply to this situation, at once through the repetition of its ironic commands and through the counter-affirmation of a “We” that concludes the insistent assonance of the final stanza:

 speak white
 de Westminster à Washington relayez-vous
 speak white comme à Wall Street
 white comme à Watts
 be civilized
 et comprenez notre parler de circonstance
 quand vous nous demandez poliment
 how do you do

et nous entendez vous répondre
we're doing all right
we're doing fine
we
are not alone

nous savons
que nous ne sommes pas seuls

speak white
from Westminster to Washington take turns
speak white like on Wall Street
white like in Watts
be civilized
and understand our circumstantial speech
when you ask us politely
how do you do
and you hear us reply
we're doing all right
we're doing fine
we
are not alone

we know
that we are not alone

In the jargon of *La Mésentente*, Lalonde's performance is a form of speaking out from the position of those whose voices are not heard and not taken into account. The poem is at the same time an act of political subjectification and a mise-en-scène of a response to those designated as oppressors. The politics that it stages goes beyond Rancière's literary dissensus showing that the literary moment of interruption does not necessarily need to be individual and can in fact coincide with the structure of political "disagreement."

Later in the evening, Lalonde performs "Panneaux-réclame" (Billboards) together with Michèle Rossignol and Michel Garneau. The performers begin by framing their speech acts: "Ce poème est un panneau-

réclame.” Echoing the title, this quasi-epic poem is presented as part of a publicity war between differing accounts of history. Like the billboards on public roads and the televised fragments of mechanized perfection, the voices of the performers stage speech itself. Through repetition, elaborate rhythms and word play, the poem aims to undo the fraudulent unity of narratives of the American “heritage of splendor.” A phrase such as “KEEP AMERICA BEAUTIFUL” is thus replaced by a question that resonates throughout the performance “America?....Merica? Merica? Merica?” (76, 66). The poem unfolds as a conflictual process of bringing back to memory those suppressed stories and elements that also make up America: a scattered mix of objects, wars, names, treaties, and murders. Lalonde shows how the violence of the colonial past bleeds into the brutal realities of the present, and yet is persistently dissimulated by various social, economic, and political discourses.

PREMIÈRE VOIX, marquant la progression
 Troc de mythologies
 hystérie de conversion
 missionnaire contre manitou
 foi de fer contre foi de bois
 Soldats du Christ et
 Coup de mousquet

TROISIÈME VOIX, réagissant
 Kkkkkkhhhhh!.....

DEUXIÈME VOIX, sur le coup
 Ah!..... (puis rendant le souffle): mérica mérica mérica
 Léger temps

PREMIÈRE VOIX
 Le huron saigne sous le gratte-ciel
 Son éloquence est écarlate

Un temps (66-67)

FIRST VOICE, marking the progression
Barter of mythologies
hysteria of conversion
missionary against Manitou
iron faith against wooden faith
Christ's Soldiers and
Musket fire

THIRD VOICE, reacting
Kkkkkkhhhh!.....

SECOND VOICE, on the spot
Ah!..... (then with a last breath): merica merica merica
Short pause

FIRST VOICE
The Huron bleeds below the skyscraper
His eloquence is scarlet

A pause

Here, the metonymic sequence is propelled by several intertwined instances of alliteration and assonance, culminating in the musket fire announcing the massacres upon which the colonial society is founded. The cry of suffering is thus inscribed in the A of America, later also fused with the cry of Martin Luther King Jr., assassinated two years earlier (74). I have highlighted just a few of these repeated sounds; their density intensifies the silence following the final line of this scene, framing the image of the grandeur of a “New World” built upon the blood, the ruins and the bodies of the old one. Yet with its best and most powerful cleaning agents, the new “germicidal civilization” can continuously wash its hands of the blood it spills; it can “venir au bout des négritudes les plus rebelles .” (74) The poem thus evokes the interdependent stories of the birth of capitalism, the violence of European colonization, the extermination of First Nations peoples, and the repression of

Black Power movements. At the same time, it also demonstrates how these histories are immediately swallowed up by the triumph of a monotonous present, moving to the rhythms of factory sirens and Campbell's soup commercials. "Améritincan way of life/ Buvez coke buvez pepsi/ Achetez Campbell et Kraft cuisinez Betty Crocker/ Salivez, yum-yumez, cric-croquez, snap, crackle et poppez" (72). In these lines, pronounced syllable by syllable, one hears the pavlovian echoes of 1960s commercials: the mechanical voice of Betty Crocker, affirming that "I guarantee the perfect cake... every time you bake, ... cake after cake after cake;" Coca Cola's upbeat guarantee that "things go better with coke, after coke, after coke;" or Rice Krispies' totalizing slogan "snap crackle pop makes the world go round." Lalonde weaves these elements to portray a society in which publicity sets the rhythm for passivity. The poem's imperatives, as much a parody of the commercialization of culture as an interpellation of the spectator, demonstrate the process by which language can become a voided medium that merely directs reflexes and replaces thought, conditioning everything from eating to intimacy. The epic (l'épopée) of our time simply becomes "snap, crackle et poppez." In parallel, America's "luxury" and "splendor," already tainted with whitewashed blood and silenced cries, is further transformed, as the "Ameri-Kkk-Ah!" constructed by the poem is submerged by a series of portmanteau words replacing history with capitalist compulsion: Américagnotte, Américash, Amériche, Mécanique Amérique.

The performance, however, does not remain mired in pessimist

critique. It closes by transforming the commercial slogan “LAST CHANCE DERNIÈRE CHANCE” into the urgent and empowering promise of revolt, a future nourished by the “secret publicity messages” written on the blank protest signs of poetry. These “messages” are not contained in any party line or representation of any particular ideology, even some neat opposition between Anglophone and Francophone, for example. It is true that English appears mainly in the form of ironic clichés: “extra-large,” “King Size,” “For Sale,” or “Cheap Labor,” but these phrases all have their French equivalents throughout as well, and “Rue Saint-Jacques” ultimately parallels “Wall Street.” What the performers are denouncing is rather the insidious mechanisms of a dehumanizing capitalism, which transcend linguistic or cultural divisions.

The poem thus realizes a *langagement*: it creates a space of polemic confrontation between historical clichés, political slogans, and signs of capitalist domination on the one hand, and a crucial resistance to their oppressive propagation on the other. It is also a space of communion. Through the interpretative distance the poem requires, it places a part of the responsibility of disinvesting from domination on the shoulders of each spectator. Indeed, at the start of the poem, the performers had repeated one after the other “Je m’appelle Michèl(e) et je vis en Amérique. Je m’appelle Michèle, et je me souviens.” Playing on the coincidence of names, the poem precisely addresses this tension between individual and collective, as well as the performative creation and situation of the political subject in the interstice between “I” and “we”. Michèl(e) thus plays the role of a poetic and political I-

we that disidentifies from what “America” has come to signify and instead turns this label into a question. At the same time, the performers and spectators all become anonymous representatives, not of a homogenous nation and time, but rather of a heterogeneous history perpetually re-constructed by mass media, politicians and unions, by essays and pamphlets, but above all in language and also through the dissensual speech of a true poetic *langagement*.

Like “Speak White” and “Panneaux-réclame,” Gaston Miron’s readings at the *Nuit de la poésie* express a commitment to speaking out and to reconfiguring the community through a poetic language that doubles as political action. Both of his readings, “Sur la place publique” and “Monologues de l’aliénation délirante” are explicit, semi-narrative reflections on the need for poetic engagement with politics and share numerous characteristics with the manifesto. Miron’s poems were published just one month after the *Nuit* in his pivotal collection *L’homme rapaillé*, which he continued to rework for the rest of his life. Labrecque and Masse’s film, with its sober recording of Miron, contributed to disseminating the poet’s work and transforming him into a cultural and political hero.

The title of “Sur la place publique” already situates the poem in a politically charged space, one of community, deliberation and activism. The 3rd line, “je suis sur la place publique avec les miens” emphasizes the communal dimension, as the poem both describes and becomes a public event, and at the same time designates the precise event of the *Nuit* in which it is inscribed. With a touch of familial intimacy, the invocation of ethnic

continuity, “avec les miens,” reinforces the theme of solidarity that runs throughout the poem, already announced by the opening address “mes camarades.”

Mes camarades au long cours de ma jeunesse
si je fus le haut-lieu de mon poème maintenant
je suis sur la place publique avec les miens
et mon poème a pris le mors obscur de nos combats

Longtemps je fus ce poète au visage conforme
qui frissonnait dans les parallèles de ses pensées
qui s'étiolait en rage dans la soie des désespoirs
et son coeur raillait la crue des injustices

Friends if in the long course of my youth
I was the high place of my poem now
I am in the public square with my people
and my poem has taken on the dark bite of our struggles

For so long I was that conforming poet
who trembled in the parallels of his thought
who withered with rage in the silk of his despairs
and his heart mocked the rising injustices

Through a personal narrative, the first stanzas set up a contrast between two kinds of poetry, condensing the concerns of the entire poem. Away from the “place publique,” the poetry that dominated youth, the poetry of the past, is characterized by loftiness, cold, vanity and isolation, and the language used to describe it maintains a certain preciousness, conforms to a timeless ideal of poetry that is not in tune with the times. Moreover, it is a poetry that lacks a certain authenticity, whose speaker does not coincide with the poet (“je fus le haut-lieu de mon poème,” “je fus ce poète...”). This is the poetry of an alienated “I,” not yet conscious of the sources of his despair.

Or je vois nos êtres en détresse dans le siècle
je vois notre infériorité et j'ai mal en chacun de nous

Aujourd'hui sur la place publique qui murmure
j'entends la bête tourner dans nos pas
j'entends surgir dans le grand inconscient résineux
les tourbillons des abattis de nos colères

Now I see our beings in distress in the century
I see our inferiority and I suffer within each one of us
Today in the murmuring public square
I hear the beast turning in our tracks
I hear rising in the great resinous unconscious
the whirls of the felled trees of our angers

The poem now recounts a shift, a “prise de conscience,” signaled by the “or” of the following stanza. The repetition of “je vois” and “j’entends” signal the “I”’s transformation into a subject who coincides with himself in the present and is alert and aware of his surroundings. Today’s poetry is concerned with the plural (“nos êtres en détresse,” “notre inferiorité,” “nous,” etc.) and in particular with the political destiny of the collective, as evoked by the poem’s dominant lexical field (place publique, camarades, combats, injustices, intérêt, anarchie, guerre, lutte, libertés). Nevertheless, Miron’s voice does not melt into a simple “we,” as he continues to write from a singular position. Paul Fraisse eloquently remarks on this point in his explanation of the well-known phrase “j’ai mal en chacun de nous”:

Lorsque le poète affirme “j’ai mal en chacun de nous”, il ne nie pas son individualité, mais réaffirme au contraire l’importance des sentiments personnels en faisant de ces derniers une forme de médiateur de la douleur collective. Ainsi la prise de conscience repose-t-elle avant tout sur une perception personnelle de la douleur et on voit bien ici qu’il ne s’agit pas de remplacer le « je » par le « nous », mais qu’au contraire, c’est précisément cette interrogation personnelle sur sa douleur de poète qui le conduit à prendre en considération l’ensemble de sa communauté. (174)

When the poet affirms “I suffer within each one of us,” he is not

denying his individuality. On the contrary, he reaffirms the importance of personal feelings turning these into a kind of mediator of collective pain. Thus, awareness depends above all on a personal perception of pain. We can easily see that it is not a question of replacing the “I” with the “we,” but rather, it is precisely this personal questioning of his pain as a poet that leads him to take into account the whole of his community.

While the poem is largely personal, Miron also reflects on what he believes to be the role of the poet in society: “les poètes de ce temps montent la garde du monde.” This is precisely because of his shift in perception, since he has come to the realization that politics is not simply an external and institutional affair, but rather manifests itself multiply, invisibly, internally—there is a politics of language, of emotion, of modes of perception—and therefore there is a poetic politics. Miron thus justifies his choice to write of and with(in) the world, here and now: “La poésie n’a pas à rougir de moi.” This is not a betrayal of some supposedly pure poetry, but rather the realization of poetry’s ethical potential, its ability to express and incite empathy and community.

However, this position may be tinged with some ambivalence. One stanza stands out here, almost as though it comes from a different poem. It is marked off by an ambiguous apostrophe:

Mon amour tu es là, fière dans ces jours
nous nous aimons d'une force égale à ce qui nous sépare
la rance odeur de métal et d'intérêts croulants
Tu sais que je peux revenir et rester près de toi
ce n'est pas le sang, ni l'anarchie ou la guerre
et pourtant je lutte, je te le jure, je lutte
parce que je suis en danger de moi-même à toi
et tous deux le sommes de nous-mêmes aux autres

My love you are here, proud during these times

we love each other with a force equal to that which separates us
the rancid odor of metal and crumbling interests
You know that I could come back and stay beside you
it's not blood, nor anarchy nor war
and yet I'm fighting, I swear to you I'm fighting
because I'm in danger myself before you
and we are both in danger before others

This “mon amour” is generally read as referring to a lover or as a political allegory. However, in the context of a poem about writing poetry and poetry's role in society, another possibility is that “mon amour” refers to poetry itself. Indeed, in the second poem Miron performs at the *Nuit*, poetry is directly apostrophized: “poésie mon bivouac/ ma douce svelte et fraîche révélation de l'être (“poetry my shelter/ my sweet slender and fresh revelation of being”). The “I” of the poem is “sur la place publique,” but so is poetry (“tu es là, fière dans ces jours”), and if this is the case, then Miron seems to also be expressing some reservations with respect to engaged poetic production. His love of poetry is matched by the circumstances making speech difficult. Miron suggests that, he might return to his “haut-lieu,” since the political reality does not seem violent, but that his struggle is nevertheless urgent because authenticity is in danger. Both the poet and his product, as well as his love, risk becoming entirely irrelevant to a society suffering from continuing cultural conflicts and inequality and undergoing profound transformations.

Finally, there is a subtle existential dimension to the poem, produced by the performative contradiction “je ne chante plus, je pousse la pierre de mon corps” (“I no longer sing, I push the stone of my body”). The absolute opposition between *chanter* and *pousser* is maintained even as Miron sings

the transformation of his poetic speech. Miron's self-portrayal as a sacrificed poet, as a poetic Sisyphus, offer us another interpretation of the public square, the site of Sisyphus's betrayal of the gods leading to his tragic punishment. We should recall that Sisyphus's second ruse with death, what doomed him to push his rock up the mountain for all eternity, was asking his wife Merope to deny him a proper burial. He could thus return from Hades under the pretext of punishing her, and in fact continue to live his life (Odyssey 416). Miron is on the public square, in protest, in a political space and stance, but also, perhaps, in order to be able to leave behind didacticism and arrive at a reborn *chant*. Unlike the Sartrean Sisyphus's eternal fate, however, Miron has made a conscious and transitory choice, "je ne chante plus," because in fact there is hope: "j'ai su qu'une esperance soulevait ce monde jusqu'ici" ("I knew that hope would lift the world to here").

We see a similar gesture of acceptance of a poetico-political struggle in Miron's second performance, "Monologues de l'aliénation délirante." Like "Sur la place publique," "Monologues..." introduces a certain number of themes that are central to Miron's poetry — alienation, class consciousness, cultural division, the status of poetry — and goes even further in incorporating a manifesto format. While this is a much more intricate and difficult poem than the first, it has a rather well-defined overall structure, with the first half of the poem devoted more or less to expressing grievances and the second to declaring solidarity to the values that offer hope for moving forward.

The title situates the poem's speech by emphasizing the solitude of the

speaker: the audience is witnessing a man talking to himself, an embodiment, “like many others,” of the personified entity “delirious alienation.” The written poem begins with these lines, which Miron omitted in his reading:

Le plus souvent ne sachant où je suis ni pourquoi
je me parle à voix basse voyageuse
et d’autres fois en phrases détachées (ainsi
que se meut chacune de nos vies)

Most often not knowing where I am nor why
I speak to myself in a soft wandering voice
and at other times in detached phrases (as
each of our lives moves on)

The plural “monologues” could refer to these past instances of speech, and to the poem’s stanzas themselves. In any case, Miron compares what he perceives as the incoherent quality of his speech to the quality of life of his community. The enjambement of the third line suspends the “ainsi,” emphasizing the poem’s status as a demonstration of disjointed speech and disordered, purposeless living caused by the present social conditions.

Omitting the first two stanzas of the poem, which in the printed collection describe the subject’s state of spatial and temporal confusion and his desire to melt into the ignorant masses in order to forget his situation, Miron begins his reading by denouncing the loss of a sense of self and the specifically urban linguistic situation that triggers it.

or je suis dans la ville opulente
la grande St. Catherine Street galope et claque
dans les Mille et une Nuits des néons
moi je gis, muré dans la boîte crânienne
dépoétisé dans ma langue et mon appartenance
déphasé et décentré dans ma coïncidence
ravageur je fouille ma mémoire et mes chairs
jusqu’en les maladies de la tourbe et de l’être

pour trouver la trace de mes signes arrachés emportés
pour reconnaître mon cri dans l'opacité du réel

or je descends vers les quartiers minables
bas et respirant dans leur remugle
je dérive dans des bouts de rues décousus
voici ma vraie vie — dressée comme un hangar —
débarras de l'Histoire — je la revendique
je refuse un salut personnel et transfuge
je m'identifie depuis ma condition d'humilié
je le jure sur l'obscur respiration commune
je veux que les hommes sachent que nous savons

now I am in the opulent city
the grand St. Catherine Street cracks and gallops
in the Thousand and One neon Nights
I lie walled up in my cranium
depoeticized in my language and my belonging
out of phase and decentered in my coincidence
devastatingly I search through my memory and my flesh
down to the diseases of decay and of being
to find the trace of my wrested stolen signs
to recognize my cry in the opacity of the real

now I descend towards the wretched districts
base and breathing in their stench
I drift down the bits of disjointed alleys
here it is my true life—built like a warehouse—
History's dump—I reclaim it
I refuse a personal defecting salvation
I identify through my humiliated condition
I swear upon the obscure shared breath
I want mankind to know that we know

Here, Miron presumably crosses Montreal's west-east language divide, descending from the Anglophone-dominated business world into the wretched living conditions of the Francophone working classes. The very structure of these two stanzas encodes an interdependence of self and others. With 10 and 9 lines each, the sounds and meanings of each stanza correspond strikingly with each other. The prefix "de" refers to the deprived "I" just as it does to the

miserable neighborhoods he wanders through (dépoétisé, déphasé, décentré // décousus, débarras); the magical St. Catherine Street unwinds into the bits and pieces of dark, disjointed roads (“la grande St. Catherine Street galope et claque” // “je dérive dans des bouts de rues décousus”); the “I” feels trapped in his mind, much like his community lies stored up in the emptiness of a warehouse (“muré dans la boîte crânienne” // “dressée comme un hangar”). What we see here is an illustration of what Chamberland has eloquently described as an “éthique et poétique d'un sujet citoyen assumant sans réserve la tension entre l'intime et le public, entre la tentation de l'autisme et celle du grégaire” (Chamberland 40). Just as is the case in the first two stanzas, these lines reflect a passage from individual to collective, from the description of a personal experience of alienation to the expression of a desire to surpass it through community. In the context of the public reading, Miron’s “nous savons” takes on an awakening force directed specifically at the audience and sets the stage for action. While not falling into prescription, Miron declares his personal commitment. The poet begins to acknowledge that his frustration is part of a larger communal struggle, one in which his poetry is already implicated because of its dependence on cultural memory and on the status of language. Miron feels “dépoétisé dans ma langue” because the words of his mother tongue are “arrachés emportés,” scattered throughout an English-dominated, bilingual space of commercial slogans and poor translations. As he states in “Notes sur le non-poème et le poème”:

Je parle de ce qui me regarde, le langage, ma fonction sociale
comme poète, à partir d'un code commun à un peuple. Je dis que

la langue est le fondement même de l'existence d'un peuple, parce qu'elle réfléchit la totalité de sa culture de signes, en signifiés, en signifiante. Je dis que je suis atteint dans mon âme, mon être, je dis que l'altérité pèse sur nous comme un glacier qui fond sur nous, qui nous déstructure, nous englobe, nous dilue. Je dis que cette atteinte est la dernière phase d'une dépossession de soi comme être, ce qui suppose qu'elle a été précédée par l'aliénation du politique et de l'économique.

I speak of what concerns me, language, my social function as a poet, starting from a code shared by a people. I am saying that language is the very foundation of a people's existence, because it reflects the totality of its signifying culture, through signifieds, through meaning. I am saying that I am afflicted in my soul, my being, I am saying that alterity weighs upon us like a glacier that is melting on us, that destructures us, that bogs us down, dilutes us. I am saying that this aggression is the last phase of a dispossession of the self as being, which presupposes that it was preceded by political and economic alienation.

Miron's explanation emphasizes the fact that he considers his poetic creation to be a public act, fully participating in the social and political development of the community. We can recall from our discussion of Benedict Anderson that one of the fundamental elements permitting the development of nations was the linguistic dissemination of confidence in common possessions, including language itself. To the extent that language as a shared code of expression allows the maintenance of a national community, its de-centering and de-structuring reflects and encourages the disintegration of that communal imaginary. Miron then takes this logic one step further, explaining that the linguistic dispossession accompanying economic and political dispossession also affects the self and leads to a kind of social madness.

In the final three stanzas, poetry, humanity and resistance each emerge as values that can oppose alienation. The word "resistance" draws particular

attention at the very conclusion of the poem, with its context strongly evoking a parallel with genocide.

à tous je me lie
jusqu'à l'état de détritrus s'il le faut
dans la résistance
à l'amère décomposition viscérale et ethnique
de la mort des peuples drainés
où la mort n'est même plus la mort de quelqu'un

I bind myself to all
even to the point of disintegration if needed
in resistance
to the bitter visceral and ethnic decomposition
of drained peoples' death
where death is no longer even the death of a person

Miron concludes polemically, with the terms *détritrus*, *décomposition* and the three appearances of *mort*, inspiring an intense sense of urgency. In spite of the glimmers of hope scattered throughout, (“je suis retrouvé,” “des pans de courage,” “je m’entête à exister,” etc.) Miron’s exaggerated rhetoric closes with a glimpse of a dismal future. He is perhaps also comparing the situation of Québec poetry with that of the Résistance. Several lines create a contrast between the poem’s dreary urban setting and oneiric fragments of floral imagery: “la peine lente dans les lilas,” “claytonies petites blanches claytonies de mai,” “feux rouges les hagards tournesols de la nuit,” “je suis signalé d’aubépines et d’épiphanies.” Miron’s tone and vocabulary thus recall Louis Aragon’s “Les lilas et les roses,” a 1940 poem mourning the occupation of France by German forces. Aragon writes:

Ô mois des floraisons mois des métamorphoses
Mai qui fut sans nuage et juin poignardé
Je n’oublierai jamais les lilas ni les roses
Ni ceux que le printemps dans ses plis a gardés

O months of flowerings months of metamorphoses
May without a cloud and June that was stabbed
I will never forget the lilac and the roses
Nor those whom spring has kept in its folds

The month of May figures in both poems, as both Aragon and Miron interweave jarring images of human suffering and death with the traditional associations of spring and rebirth. Miron's consciousness has undergone a transformation leading him to devote himself and his poetry to the community's struggle, but in the face of the poem's polemic conclusion, such a commitment is clearly not enough. The final words of "Monologues..." violently remind the audience of the need to resist oppression in all its forms, and to take action as much in defense of Montréal's "signes arrachés emportés" as of the "humanité des hommes lointains."

As we have seen, political rhetoric seeps into these poems as they tackle concrete historical problems: workers' conditions, social silencing, linguistic alienation, the loss of cultural memory and historical significance. They offer readers, writers, spectators and society, past and present, a renewed vision of community and democratic responsibility. The voices I have discussed throughout this chapter bring into being a poetic "place publique," built through empathy and resistance, in constant dialogue both with the singularity of the individual and with humanity as an ideal to be preserved and defended in all its manifestations.

CHAPTER 3
DIFFRACTING AN “*OEUVRE-VIE*”:
READINGS OF RENÉ DEPESTRE

*La création littéraire est l'opération par laquelle, à travers une invention, des rythmes, des sortilèges, un homme ou une femme cherche avec passion à insérer la vérité de sa condition, sa présence souvent problématique, sa voix, ses obsessions, son expérience, son enfance, le scandale de ses souffrances et de ses joies, dans le drame collectif de la société.*⁴¹

-René Depestre, *Pour la révolution, pour la poésie*

This definition, tinged with magical realism, captures two important elements at the core of René Depestre's poetic journeys. The first is the elaboration of a politico-poetic subject and his or her attempt to grapple with the disparate elements making up an “experience.” Secondly, literature is defined in terms of relation, as speech that is woven back into the social fabric, an act of participation in a “collective drama.”

For Depestre, this collective drama began in a Haiti under the United States occupation (1915-1934) that aggravated racial antagonism and attempted to implement American-style segregation along with forced labor (Dash, *Literature and Ideology* 49). Even after 1934, white and light-skinned

⁴¹ “Literary creation is the operation through which, using invention, rhythms, spells, a man or a woman passionately seeks to insert the truth of their condition, their often problematic presence, their voice, their obsessions, their experience, their childhood, the scandal of their throes and joys, into the collective drama of society” (*Pour la révolution, pour la poésie* 12-13).

mulatto elites remained in power and continued to serve American economic and political interests (Smith). Depestre's adolescence saw President Élie Lescot's ravaging of the Haitian countryside for the sake of a failed American-led rubber cultivation plan, and the equally unsuccessful yet forceful Catholic anti-superstition campaign that sought to eradicate Voodoo and Protestantism (Dash 160; Smith 43-46, 48-50). In the face of rising opposition, Lescot modified the constitution and extended his term in office (Smith 54).

In 1945, Depestre published his first collection of poems, *Étincelles*, which he felt launched “une tout petite lueur dans la nuit où vivait alors Haïti sous la dictature de Lescot” (“a faint glimmer in the night in which Haiti lived then, under Lescot's dictatorship”; Couffon 18-19). With the success of his first collection, he began a weekly literary and political journal called *La Ruche*, “éuphemisme apicole qui dissimulait aux yeux de la censure le guêpier qu'on voulait être pour la bande à Lescot” (“beekeeping euphemism which hid from the censorship's sight the hornet's nest that we wanted to be for Lescot's gang”; Couffon 24). In January of 1946, the government seized a special issue dedicated to surrealism and André Breton, and blocked further publication of the journal. This sparked student protests and built into a wider wave of insurrection, a Haitian “Mai '68,” that swept over the whole country, toppling the Lescot regime (*Le Métier à métisser* 16). However, the revolt ultimately failed with respect to its wider aspirations, as Depestre explains:

En Janvier 1946, nous avions pratiquement le contrôle d'Haïti. Nous voulions donner le pouvoir à la jeunesse, ouvrir des voies à la nouvelle culture, décoloniser le pays soumis au contrôle des États-Unis et établir une démocratie socialiste. Or, peu à peu, des

forces obscures et maléfiques nous dépossédaient de notre victoire. Je voyais de jour en jour notre influence se réduire [...] J'écrivais des poèmes pour clamer mon refus ou museler mon amertume. (Couffon 27-28)

In January 1946, we practically had control over Haiti. We wanted to give power to the youth, to open the way to the new culture, to decolonize the country from the United States's control and to establish a socialist democracy. Yet, little by little, dark and evil forces were deposing us of our victory. I could see our influence decrease day by day [...] I was writing poems to proclaim my refusal or muzzle my bitterness.

Depestre was briefly imprisoned along with other contributors of *La Ruche*. Later in 1946, after publishing a second poetry collection, *Gerbe de sang*, he was sent to study in Paris. His anti-colonial activism there, alongside writers such as Frantz Fanon, Léon Damas and Léopold Sédar Senghor, forced him to leave France in 1950. Since then, his life has been traversed by numerous other exiles from his “native land,” including Cuba, Czechoslovakia, Chile, Argentina, and Brazil. With every new displacement, Depestre found ways to continue his political activism and formed friendships with members of the local intelligentsias. His political involvement in the Haitian revolts of 1946 and in the Cuban Revolution, as well as his relationships with authors such as Paul Éluard, Nicolás Guillén and Pablo Neruda, have left a lasting imprint on his work.

In many ways René Depestre's *oeuvre-vie* lends itself perfectly to the kind of multi-dimensional study I am proposing here. Depestre has recently reflected on his literary and political evolution in *Le Métier à métisser*, a collection of essays tracing his intellectual trajectory through the influences of “la négritude debout, le surréalisme, le marxisme et son idée de révolution, le

castrofidélisme, le guévarisme, l'érotisme solaire, l'exil, l'aventure de la mondialisation..." (*négritude* standing, surrealism, Marxism and its idea of revolution, Castrofidelism, Guevarism, solar eroticism, exile, the adventure of globalization..."; 9). Throughout this "errance de toute une vie" ("a whole life's wandering"; 11), Depestre's literary production has sought to negotiate between these forces, viewing literature as both a sociopolitical act and an indispensable part of an apolitical *joie de vivre*, as both profoundly implicated in the struggle for decolonizing bodies and minds and as "une bonne façon individuelle de tourner le dos à la 'névrose coloniale'" ("a good individual way to turn one's back on the 'colonial neurosis'"; 151). Depestre's shifting articulation of poetry and politics is therefore far from straightforward, and allows us to examine a position that does not fit neatly into either commitment or art for art's sake categories.

Sections:

3.1—Tissages

3.1.1—The Political at the Heart of the Intimate in Gerbe de sang

3.1.2—Reading Étincelles: Depestre's Poetics of Subjectification

3.2—The Rainbow's Poetics of Revolt

3.3—Politics of the Masculine Voice

3.1—*Tissages*

Literature is always a matter of *tissage*, a weaving of words and ideas, which, depending on the circumstances, can be more or less transparent, and more or less subversive. In Depestre's poetry, the construction of the lyric subject is often visibly and reflexively dependent on a playful interweaving of voices, sources and discourses. In particular, Depestre has always been concerned with negotiating between elements of Haitian, European and global imaginaries. From his earliest poems in *Étincelles* and *Gerbe de sang*, he not only demonstrates a resistance to separating politics, ethics and aesthetics, but also refuses myths of purity, be they national, racial, or cultural. In this sense, he is perhaps an exemplary figure of what Paul Gilroy has termed the "Black Atlantic," a transnational formation of black critical and emancipatory reconstructive thought. Gilroy explains that, "where racist, nationalist, or ethnically absolutist discourses orchestrate political relationships so that [European and black] identities appear to be mutually exclusive, occupying the space between them or trying to demonstrate their continuity has been viewed as provocative and even oppositional act of political insubordination" (1). In this section, I examine some of the different ways in which Depestre has attempted to articulate such a "space between."

3.1.1—*The Political at the Heart of the Intimate in Gerbe de sang*

In one of the few sustained readings of Depestre's work, Michael Dash describes the poet's early revolutionary verse in terms of Surrealist ideals. Dash claims that "surrealist theory on poetry and revolution was a literary aesthetic which corresponded to [Haitian intellectuals'] specific artistic as well as political needs" (*Literature and Ideology* 157). Breton's visit to Haiti in 1945 was indeed enthusiastically embraced by Haiti's 1946 generation of writers and intellectuals. Dash explains that, since surrealism "shunned the fatigued rationality and inhibiting materialism of the West and actively promoted the search for spontaneity and originality in non-Western traditions" it was quite easily "assimilated into anti-colonial polemics" throughout the Caribbean (157). However, the Surrealist filter through which Dash reads Depestre has some significant shortcomings, not least of which is Dash's undue insistence on "unconscious forces" (159) and "automatic writing" (169). The critic paradoxically begins to depoliticize texts that he himself agrees are Depestre's attempts "to relate his own poetic universe to the reality of revolutionary politics" (178). Describing Depestre's poetry as "free from a repressed consciousness" (167) and "freed from the inhibitions of the past" (171), Dash overlooks what is precisely the central thrust of Depestre's early work: his omnipresent attempt to grapple with a difficult and divided reality. National consciousness, class consciousness, double consciousness – so many forms of *consciousness* informing even Depestre's early writing that Dash's commentary does not engage with due to an over-reliance on the convenient

label of surrealism.

We can quickly see the insufficiency of a surrealist reading by looking at Depestre's most "surrealist" collection, *Gerbe de sang*. The poem "Ressouvenance," for example, presents itself as a love poem, but its vocabulary owes perhaps more to the highly-codified troubadour tradition than to an unleashing of the unconscious. Depestre sometimes borders on preciousity and appropriates common images of troubadour love poetry (amour, bouche, yeux, cœur, l'oiseau qui chante, printemps, fleurs, etc.). The poet describes his solitude in terms of life and death, "avant toi je mourrais de mon écho [...] / puis tu es venue animer ce squelette" ("before you I was dying of my echo [...] / then you came and brought this skeleton to life"). But this focus on an absent lover and muse is then unexpectedly interwoven with an awareness of contemporary political struggle and the heritage of revolutionary fervor: "Nous sommes enfants des barricades/Pour notre soif chaque fusil est fontaine" ("We are children of the barricades/For our thirst every musket is a fountain"). Amorous language is thus penetrated by a consciousness and a demand:

au fin fond de nos jeunes amours
découvrons l'oiseau qui chante
et la palme et la perle et toute fraternité [...]
à la veille de la plus vaste lutte
à nous de braver la menace des chiens.

at the farthest depths of our youthful passions
let's discover the bird that sings
the palm and the pearl and every brotherhood [...]
on the eve of the greatest battle
it's up to us to face the hounds' threat

The poem is not through and through political, and it is indeed sprinkled with several surrealist-type associations (“nos paupières n’ont point d’écluses/nos jambes n’ont point de clés”). However, at the same time, at the heart of the amorous relation one finds the basis for a vaster fraternity. Love is also a means for constructing a revolutionary foundation. The “nous” is simultaneously the space of a natural eroticism (“tu fus une caresse de chat/contre ma nudité/tu fus un long glissement d’herbe”) and of a newly formed political subject whose existence is under threat. The poem closes with another demand, tenderly addressed to the lover and the reader:

à toi maintenant À ta bouche de lianes
de nouer sur ma bouche
autant de fleurs Autant de sources
qu’il y a de mots dans ce poème.

your turn now May your liana mouth
tie to my mouth
as many flowers As many sources
as there are words in this poem.

A kiss, an embrace, a game, a playful provocation (again recalling troubadour love song), also the declaration of a return to poetic and political sources. Alongside what can be read as an “innocent” love poem, then, “Ressouvenance” also gestures toward the necessity of blending historical memory and literary traditions in order to arrive at poetic inspiration, while simultaneously affirming the need for violent action. It demonstrates Depestre’s *tissage* of a poetic subject occupying a space between love and militancy. We can see an even more intense fusion of intimacy with struggle in the poem “Pour l’enfant qui aura toujours seize ans.”

Il est juste temps de [...] fixer tout au fond du lac légendaire de
tes yeux mon masque d'ombres qui compte à la première heure
épouser la beauté des foules en dissidence et les lèvres et le nez et
les cheveux de tous les exploités du monde tel que tu ne me
reconnaitras plus aux accents féroces de mon nouveau visage.
[...]

L'élan vital Le délire tout puissant de mes vingt ans vont passer
dans les printemps à venir et dans le corps infini du monde en
détresse tel que m'entourant la taille de tes bras de citronnelle tu
auras l'impression de saisir un globe incandescent

It is just the time to [...] to set in the depths of the legendary lake
of your eyes my mask of shadows which plans to espouse the
beauty of the dissident crowds and the lips and the nose and the
hair of all the exploited of the world so that you will not
recognize me with the fierce accents of my new face. [...]

The vital force The all-powerful delirium of my twenty years will
flow into the springs to come and into the infinite body of the
world in distress so that encircling my waist with your
lemongrass arms you will have the impression of grasping an
incandescent globe

Once again we witness the interweaving of a scene of romance with a
global political scene. Here, the voice of a dying dissident apostrophizes an
“enfant de ma révolte et de mon vertige,” just in time to ask that the struggle
be continued. A fantasy of communion with the exploited masses unfolds
beginning with the metaphor of the mask and continuing with the
enumeration of body parts that become unrecognizable to the lover. They are
no longer simply the subject's own, singular and individual, but now also
representative parts of a collective body. Here, the promise of amorous
possession becomes coextensive with the desire to infuse a distressed world
with power. Just as before, we find that even in the depths of passion, the
shadow of history remains. In his appropriation of dark forces and “accents
féroces,” Depestre is indeed very close to Rimbaud, although not in a surrealist

sense. Depestre's aestheticization of the crowd invests it with a kind of mythical dignity that contrasts with Rimbaud's crude or grotesque depictions. And while similarly denouncing a generalized hypocrisy—sexual, moral, economic, social, political—Depestre inflects Rimbaud's revolt towards a specifically communist historical and political awareness turning the “hideux feuillets de mon carnet de damné” into that of a “damné de la terre” (“Saison de colère”). What we see, then, seems close to the elaboration of what Joan Dayan has called a “social lyric.” Indeed, the lyric subject, immersed in the youthful exploration of intimacy and emotion, never quite loses sight of sociopolitical conditions. *Étincelles* had already set the stage for this type of poetic concern with its celebrated poem “Je ne viendrai pas”:

Je ne viendrai pas ce soir
tisser au fil de ton regard
des heures d'abandon
de tendresse
d'amour
Des camarades de bronze
ont convié
ma jeunesse
à l'assaut de cette citadelle
qui s'écroule
[...]
car quel sens donner
à nos baisers
à nos étreintes
à ce soir brûlant de fièvre
si notre amour reste indifférent
aux appels désespérés de la souffrance humaine.

I will not come tonight
to weave over your gaze
hours of surrender
of tenderness
of love
Comrades of bronze

have called on
my youth
to attack the fortress
that is collapsing
[...]
since what meaning can I give
to our kisses
to our embraces
to this feverishly burning evening
if our love were to remain indifferent
to the desperate calls of human suffering

As we saw in the first two poems, even at the threshold of intimate abandon, the lyric subject cannot be “immune from the inhibitions of ordinary reality” (Dash 168). In fact, here, these inhibitions are of an openly political nature, and they preclude amorous satisfaction. The possibility of romantic love is intimately intertwined with that of universal love.

The poem that perhaps comes closest to Dash’s description is “La nouvelle creation,” where the poetic voice exclaims that “Nous sommes deux enfants nouvellement/apparus sur la surface du globe” (“We are two children newly/ come into being on the surface of the globe”). The poem certainly builds around numerous images of innocence: “nos noces virginales,” “nos cœurs neufs,” “la fraîcheur/du beau limon vert,” “l’œuvre de la création recommence avec nous,” etc. (“our virginal wedding,” “our new hearts,” “the freshness/ of green lime,” “the work of creation begins anew with us”). This new Adam and Eve *dream* of abolishing the “inhibitions of the past” (Dash 171):

d’un trait nous avons biffé l’Histoire du monde
pas de haine pas d’espérance inégales
pas de carrières avortées Pas ce partage
de la sueur des hommes

entre une poignée d'assassins

with one stroke we've expunged the History of the world
no hate no unequal hopes
no aborted careers Not this partition
of men's sweat
among a handful of assassins

The use of the past tense and the confidence of the poetic voice might add to this impression of stepping outside History. Except that the very structure of the poem makes it impossible to dream beyond this stage of negation, and History remains at its very heart. The scene of poetic writing, the scene of amorous intimacy, the scene of original creation: every utopic space that might offer solace from the hatred in the world is also haunted by a painful reality that will not be silenced. "Pas ce partage" dreams Depestre's young lover, yet the "partage" cannot be erased even in the most intimate or paradisiacal of spaces.

This conviction is perhaps one of the main motivations for Depestre's rapid disenchantment with the surrealist movement. To be sure, there were already plenty of differences between European surrealist thought and Depestre's socialist realist tendencies. Furthermore, as Martin Munro correctly points out, "Breton [seemed] to *remythify* Haiti, seeing its people as essentially primitive and 'les plus près des sources'" ("closest to the roots"; 192). Despite any positive associations Breton might have given to the 'primitiveness' of those he claimed were still in touch with African animism, his racial essentializations conflicted sharply with Depestre's attempts to think beyond race (Munro 192-193). However, it is the ultimate failure of the

surrealism-inspired insurrection of 1946 that Depestre insists on the most in many of his essays. He explains that “la dictature de Lescot s’effondra, mais l’appareil d’État du régime néo-colonial resta intact. [...] Cet échec haïtien indiquait également les limites du surréalisme et de son ambition majeure de ‘changer la vie’” (“Lescot’s dictatorship collapsed, but the State apparatus of the neo-colonial regime remained intact. [...] This Haitian failure also pointed to the limits of surrealism and its major ambition of ‘changing life’”; BAN 231). Depestre thus became quite critical of Breton’s limited implementation of the Rimbaudian slogan, claiming that Breton “resta confiné à l’univers individualiste de son imagination” (“remained confined to the individualist universe of his imagination”; 232). For Depestre, surrealism seemed to produce merely “des tempêtes dans un verre d’eau loin du monde réel, et des forces sociales de la révolution” (“storms in a glass of water far from the real world, and the social forces of revolution,” 232). For this reason, Munro explains that “Depestre’s poetry (unlike Césaire’s) avoided the high esoterism of surrealism and largely drew its images and metaphors from the ‘conscious’ world of work and politics rather than from the ‘unconscious’ realms of fantasy and nightmare” (194). While Césaire’s poetic language is much more aesthetically complex and his linguistic displacements often carry powerful political implications, Depestre’s engagement with historical and political discourse is often more direct and accessible. His omnipresent consciousness of social conditions, interwoven as we have seen even with themes of romantic love and eroticism, highlights an inescapable urgency of revolt.

3.1.2—Reading *Étincelles*: Depestre's Poetics of Subjectification

In the shadow of an acute historical consciousness, Depestre's poetic subjects take on and weave together diverse identities, solidarities and literary traditions. This transparent process of the construction of an in-between subject is central to much of his work. The "I" reaches out, feeling around, searching for itself behind even in the most confident declarations. Moreover, this adventure seems to begin each time anew with every poem, eroding the idea of a pre-formed "I" that would precede the affirmations of the poetic verb. Rather than an integral "reflection of *pre-given* ethnic or cultural traits set in the fixed tablet of tradition," the subject is re-envisioned as an unfinished project working to undo the building blocks of colonial thought and discourse (Bhabha 3).

"Me voici," the poem opening Depestre's first poetry collection, *Étincelles*, is structured around multiple, seemingly straightforward layers of identification: "citoyen des Antilles," "fils de l'Afrique lointaine," "nègre aux vastes espoirs," "prolétaire," "poète," "adolescent" ("citizen of the Antilles," "son of far-away Africa," "negro with vast hopes"). The "I" appropriates and connects these common terms. However, it does so perhaps not so much as a straightforward summation of Caribbean, African and proletarian elements, but rather as part of a multiform and ever-evolving process, open to new connections in later poems. Race is maintained, yet never becomes essentializing; class is always mediated by the local and is "distinctly 'Caribbeanized'" (Munro 194). Depestre's "Me voici" thus creates what Bhabha

describes as an “interstitial passage between fixed identifications [which] opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy” (5). The speaker’s first act as a “citoyen des Antilles” is to “vole à la conquête des bastilles nouvelles,” and as a “prolétaire,” he exclaims that “le sang de toute l’humanité noire/ fait éclater mes veines bleues” (“rush to the conquest of new Bastilles”; “the blood of all of black humanity/ bursts through my blue veins”). These names thus look beyond seemingly pre-existing categories and incompatibilities. From the Caribbean to revolutionary France to Africa, weaving together blackness, Marxism, and poetry, “Me voici” begins to build a political poetic subject through the rhetorical invocation of historical continuities and displacements. This subject demands recognition from in-between imbricated layers of identification, while at the same time transforming these through the construction of a singular poetic voice.

We can read this process as a form of political subjectification, to borrow Jacques Rancière’s terminology. That is, at once the removal from the naturalness of a fixed, policed identity, from the “disciplines nuageuses de [son] enfance,” and the construction of an “*in-between* [...] entre plusieurs noms, statuts ou identités; entre l’humanité et l’inhumanité, la citoyenneté et son déni; entre le statut de l’homme de l’outil et celui de l’être parlant et pensant” (“cloudy disciplines of [his] childhood”; “Me voici”; “between several names, statuses, and identities; between humanity and inhumanity, citizenship and its denial; between the status of a man of tools and the status

of a speaking and thinking being”; *Aux bords du politique* 119). Throughout *Étincelles*, as well as much of Depestre’s other work, this “citoyen des Antilles” never ceases to demonstrate the instability of such a citizenship, at once because he is already conscious of being simultaneously a citizen of Haiti and a citizen of the world, and because he is painfully aware of the gap between the ideals of citizenship and the limiting reality of historical conditions. Refusing the imposed “silence du résigné,” he dreams and speaks of Bastilles, Liberty and Man (“accepting silence”).

Depestre’s weaving of the political-poetic subject is also an intertextual process. Michael Dash identifies some important connections in his commentary of *Étincelles*. However, while much of Dash’s book takes up the precise idea of post-independence Haitian literature’s continued struggle to achieve distinction and authenticity, the critic’s readings effectively relegate Depestre’s work to what he had classified as “inspired plagiarism” in the context of 19th century Haitian writing. He claims, for instance, that Depestre was “disposed to imitate” Jacques Roumain, and declares that Paul Éluard’s war poems were a “pre-text” for *Étincelles* (*Literature and Ideology* 160). Dash’s readings, then, come close to reducing Depestre’s verse to psittacism, an “innocent” schoolboy’s exercise that successfully assimilates the techniques and themes of his predecessors from Rimbaud to Roumain.

According to Dash, “Je connais un mot” is “constructed in an identical fashion” with Éluard’s “Liberté” (163). In merely identifying the two poems, or at least treating the relationship between them at the level of “pre-text” rather

than intertext, Dash misses the opportunity to interpret Depestre's poem on its own terms, or see what Depestre does differently from Éluard. There is indeed an echo in the central vocabulary of the two poems: "j'écris ton nom" and "je connais un mot," and in both cases, the word in question is only revealed at the end of the poem ("I write your name"; "I know a word"). However, while in Éluard's poem the only verb is "écrire," "Je connais un mot" flows through a multiplication of action verbs: "provoque," "réssussite," "gonfle," "flotte," "brille," "piétine," etc. ("write," "provoke," "revive," "swell," "float," "shine," "stamp"). One can make the immediate observation that, unlike the insistent repetition of Éluard's twenty one quatrains, the central word in Depestre's poem is built through a much freer poetic structure. Moreover, while the poem's images construct "Haiti" between earth and sky, between past, present and future, between social classes, they also infuse it with its specific history of revolution:

Je connais un mot tout flambant d'histoire
 il représente le diane des matins incendiés
 les rassemblements dans les bois fraternels
 les champs de canne rôtis par la souffrance
 l'inquiétude de milliers d'opprimés
 la liberté voltigeant sur les ailes de la mort.

I know a word blazing with history
 it stands for the reveille of incendiary mornings
 the gathering in brotherly woods
 the sugarcane fields roasted by suffering
 the worries of thousands of oppressed
 freedom fluttering on the wings of death

Moving beyond a unified image of abstract liberty, Depestre's poem vertiginously recalls Haiti's slave revolts before turning to a now 'free' Haiti,

whose national reality is still full of painful injustices. The name “Haiti” designates the gap between historical conditions and the abstract notion of liberty. The contrasting elements composing a national identity are interlaced here through a socialist realism that is absent from Éluard’s poem. Depestre, of course, “sings his love of his country,” as Dayan puts it (*Rainbow* 12); however, he simultaneously sings his hatred of those who have “prostitué leur métier d’homme” (“prostituted their human profession”). Furthermore, the word “Haiti” enfolds at once sadness and hope, the “heures immortelles” and the “solitude des tombes,” the “donzelles en robes de rubis” and the “enfants aux joues emaciées” (“immortal hours”; “solitude of graves”; “young madams in ruby dresses”; “children with emaciated cheeks”). Thus, the poem never settles into an easy nationalism, rather bringing to visibility “the otherness of the people-as-one” (Bhabha 215).

The process of political subjectification and the simultaneous deviation from fixed subjectivity is again central in “Piété filiale.” Dedicated to Langston Hughes, this poem can be read alongside Hughes’s “Negro Mother.” In Hughes’s poem, the voice of an allegorical mother tells her History: her crossing of the ocean, her work in the fields, her three hundred years of being sold, beaten, abused. Through the present of this incantatory poem, her children will be able to actualize her dream of liberty, a liberty that depends on memory to assure its future possibility. In “Piété filiale,” we can note the numerous apostrophes (“O race Africaine,” “O terre d’Afrique,” “O ma mere”) and the multiple maternal references like the repetition of “tes enfants” and

the “lait de ta mamelle féconde” (“Oh African race,” “Oh African land,” “Oh my mother”; “milk from your fertile breast”). Depestre thus seems to be responding to Hughes’s black Mother who demands that the memory of her suffering serve as a foundation for the future. To Hughes’s haunting imperative “Remember my years, heavy with sorrow—/And make of those years a torch for tomorrow,” Depestre responds with “tes rayons réchaufferont les petits enfants de nos petits enfants/c’est pourquoi nous militons” (“your rays will warm our grandchildren’s grandchildren/this is why we fight”). And interestingly, here, this militancy does *not* seem to go in the direction of the deracialized, Marxist solidarity proclaimed in “Bois d’ébène,” as Dash and Dayan have suggested. The structural and thematic links with Roumain in this poem and many others are important to note. Indeed we can see the parallel in the often-quoted lines below:

Roumain, “Bois d’ébène”:

POURTANT

je ne veux être que de votre race
ouvriers, paysans de tous les pays [...]
nous proclamons l’unité de la souffrance
et de la révolte
de tous les peuples sur toute la surface de la terre

YET

I only want to belong to your race
workers, peasants of every land [...]
we proclaim the unity of the suffering
and the revolt
of all people on the entire surface of the Earth

Depestre, “Piété filiale”:

Mais j’entends dans le lointain

monter la sourde clameur d'une mosaïque de souffrances
la grondante symphonie des abandonnés.
Blonds, jaunes, noirs peu importe,
ils versent tous un sang rouge
et les larmes n'ont pas de couleur
et la faim tenaille d'une seule façon

But I hear rising in the distance
the muffled clamor of a mosaic of sufferings
the rumbling symphony of the abandoned.
Blond, yellow, black, it matters little,
they all bleed red blood
and tears have no color
and hunger torments in only one way

However, in "Piété filiale," Depestre seems to be writing in the name of the "dark children" still struggling against a "white brother." In spite of the Marxist stanza above, the "I" piously speaks in clearly racialized terms:

O terre d'Afrique
la vraie tunique du combattant
est collée à ma chair.
Je veux aujourd'hui parler uniquement pour toi

O African land
the real warrior's tunic
is glued to my skin.
Today I want to speak only for you

The internal rhyme produced by "Afrique," "tunique," and "uniquement" insists on the element of racial solidarity. The poem leaves in the *background* ("sourde clameur," "grondante symphonie") the trans-racial Marxist dimension that forcefully concludes "Bois d'ébène" and also informs most of Depestre's other work. Instead, this is perhaps a poem that comes closest to incorporating the negritude idea of a shared, trans-national black condition. "Piété filiale" might then be read as a disidentification from a certain Marxist humanism that does away all too easily with the history of

racial oppression and the specificity of Black suffering. It can also be interpreted from the perspective of Depestre's solidarity with black activism in the United States, simply as an engaged reading of Hughes, upholding the latter's struggle. As Munro has observed with respect to Depestre's later work, *Un Arc-en-ciel pour l'occident chrétien*, the poet "rejects Negritude's racialized conflict, and its challenge to Europe, [but] he accepts American black radicalism and its challenge to white America," perhaps because of the belief that "race is the major determinant in American society" or because of his personal memories of the American occupation of Haiti (Munro 179, 177).

However, this does not mean that Depestre uncritically espouses negritude. As we saw in the previous chapter, Depestre is deeply skeptical of racial theories and is always aware that an African heritage forms only a part of his personal identity and of Haitian culture more generally. Dayan explains that "his 'Negritude' is an evolving principle wherein 'a black boy, a drop of pure water' moves from his particular situation as Black to his universal situation as a man oppressed who senses solidarity with his oppressed fellowmen" (*Rainbow* viii). In "Face à la nuit," for example, without making any explicit reference to race, Depestre shows how class domination has been inscribed into Haitian society as a direct continuation of colonialism. A tragic allegory of the Haitian present, "Face à la nuit" follows the fate of an anonymous young girl who becomes a *restavec*, and is thrown out by her masters after being raped. She dies of "prostitution." Throughout the poem, she and her masters are described mainly through socioeconomic metaphors:

she is “née sur la grand’route/ dans les bras du soleil” and has grown up on her own “autour de la chaumière,” while her master is a “dame bien comme il faut”:

une dame qui demeurait dans une belle maison
une belle maison sur les hauteurs
[...] là où la canaille ne pénètre pas.
là où les étudiants parlent du bon français
comme si nous ne parlions pas du bon français
nous autres les damnés.
Mais je m’emporte
l’on s’emporte toujours à parler de ces choses-là.
Elle rencontra donc la dame
la dame qui l’attacha à son service
comme domestique
comme esclave.
La dame n’était pas seule
elle avait un mari
un mari comme il faut
qui citait Racine et Corneille
et Voltaire et Rousseau
et le Père Hugo et le jeune Musset
et Gide et Valéry
et tant d’autres encore.

a lady who lived in a beautiful house
a beautiful house up on the heights
[...] where the riffraff do not reach.
where students speak proper french
as if we did not speak proper french
we the damned.
But I get ahead of myself
one always gets ahead of oneself talking about these things.
So she met the lady
the lady who took her in her service
as servant
as slave.
The lady was not alone
she had a husband
a proper husband
who quoted Racine and Corneille
and Voltaire and Rousseau
The lady was not alone
she had a husband

a proper husband
who quoted Racine and Corneille
and Voltaire and Rousseau
and Father Hugo and young Musset
and Gide and Valéry
and so many others.

The poem's song-like movement, driven by refrains, anaphoras, and anadiploses, creates a feeling of circularity. It is partly structured through the repetition of a "because," which echoes the narration ("parce qu'elle eut seize ans," "parce qu'elle était née," "parce qu'elle avait grandi"). This causal structure, along with a brief pronominal shift from "elle" to "on" ("quand on est né sur la grand'route," "quand on a grandi") generalizes the girl's story and reinforces the inevitable sense of tragedy looming over her.

As we can see in the lines above, in presenting the socioeconomic and spatial divisions between the pristine "là où" and the conditions of "les damnés," the narrator identifies with the girl in the sudden appearance of a "nous." The narrator thus contests the linguistic and cultural dispossession of the Haitian people, suggesting that the monopoly over 'proper' French and French culture goes hand in hand with a continued class domination that does not necessarily follow clear racial lines. Accordingly, the husband in "Face à la nuit" is described as "civilisé comme le colon le fut/cultivé comme le colon le fut." Despite having learned Racine and Corneille by heart, he has evacuated the heart from them. Depestre explains this idea in his reply to Césaire during the *Débat sur la poésie nationale*:

Deux cultures s'affrontent en Haïti. Non pas, comme on pourrait le croire, la culture africaine et la culture française. Mais d'une part une culture haïtienne, nationale, en formation, et d'autre

part, le braconnage cosmopolite auquel la classe dirigeante d'Haïti s'adonne sans pudeur dans les terrains vagues des cultures dominantes de l'Occident. (47)

Two cultures oppose each other in Haiti. Not, as one might think, the African and French cultures. But on the one hand a national Haitian culture, just shaping itself, and on the other hand, the cosmopolitan poaching to which the Haitian ruling class lends itself shamelessly in the hazy fields of the dominant Western cultures.

As Frantz Fanon explains in *Les damnés de la terre*, using this poem as part of his commentary, the assimilated dominant classes' complicity with the colonizers indigenizes colonial violence and fuels the devastating oppression, the abuses of power and the prostitution of national values evoked here. This system is maintained partly through the assumption of a mythic superiority of Western culture, which can easily become a façade facilitating exploitation.

On the other hand, Depestre rejects the idea that using French language and culture is in itself equivalent to assimilation. The fact that the French language “meurt de nostalgie et de froid sur les lèvres où il n'est plus que la parade futile, le brimborion sonore d'une semi-féodalité d'argent” does not change the fact that French could, alongside creole, be “l'un des *biens nationaux* repris par le peuple pour de meilleurs emplois” (“dies of nostalgia and cold on the lips where only a futile display remains, the useless sounds of a silvery semi-feudalism”; “one of the national values taken back by the people and put to better uses”; 47, 49). For Depestre, language simply becomes what is made of it. French is shared by Arthur de Gobineau and Jacques Roumain, by Paul Éluard and the corrupt ruling classes of Haiti. Depestre does not dismiss the popular importance of creole, but he does insist that French

culture can be a resource that should also be available to Haitian society. Rather than viewing French as other, or as somehow belonging to the colonizers or colonized elite, a position taken by so many postcolonial authors, Depestre, quite early on, sees through the myth of linguistic possession. This dimension of his thought perhaps identifies what Derrida explains in *Le Monolinguisme de l'autre*, namely “qu’il n’y a pas de propriété naturelle de la langue” (“there is no natural ownership of language”; 46). French was never a *French possession* to begin with, and Depestre sees that refusing it amounts to continuing colonial mystification. He views the appropriation of French by the Haitian people not only as an act of enrichment through cross-cultural ties, but also as an act of resistance in the face of continued cultural domination.

Depestre’s display of the *tissage* of subjects through a variety of shifting identifications reflects his ever-evolving political thought and his determined effort to combine, exceed, modify and critique fixed positions and ideologies. This does not mean that his writing *always* creates political subjectification or that his blending of politics and aesthetics is *necessarily* liberating.⁴² However, what I have highlighted here from Depestre’s early poetry, is an attempt to articulate a poetic “I” that looks beyond parochial nationalism, essentializing notions of blackness or mythical conceptions of culture and language. The visible process of the construction of subjecthood that I have discussed has the potential to demystify and empower the reader through its repeated demonstrations, especially in those moments of detour from and

⁴² See especially Depestre’s numerous communist hymns (*Végétations de clarté* (1951), for example) which illustrate a very different political dimension of his early writing.

reconfiguration of the assumptions of established categories (citizen, Haitian, proletarian, black, French, etc.).

3.2—*The Rainbow's Poetics of Revolt*

The process of subjectification and the themes of revolt and empowerment are perhaps most elaborate in Depestre's major poetic work, *Un Arc-en-ciel pour l'Occident chrétien* (1967).⁴³ This collection was written while Depestre was living in Cuba in the wake of the Cuban Missile Crisis. The *Arc-en-ciel*'s historical context is one of widespread racial and political tension and violence in the United States and throughout the world. Patrice Lumumba's CIA-assisted assassination and the imprisonment of Nelson Mandela had marked the beginning of the decade. This was the height of the Vietnam War and nuclear proliferation. It was also the time of the Watts Riots and the peak of the American civil rights movement—a period that still saw frequent lynchings and numerous acts of racist terrorism throughout the United States.⁴⁴ In this context *Arc-en-ciel* shifts between Haiti and Alabama, Johannesburg and Omaha, between recent events, the memory of slavery and slave rebellion, the eternal present of the poem, and the future promised by revolution. Incorporating all these elements, the work unfolds in the suspensive place and time of a singular Voodoo ritual. Depestre transforms Voodoo into a poetic force of resistance and regeneration directed towards the “Christian West.” The cultural system that permitted and relied on the oppression of blacks while preaching its lofty ideals is confronted with its own violence and hypocrisy, but also with a call to reconnect with humanity. The

⁴³ My selective commentary is complementary to Joan Dayan's excellent introduction to Depestre's work in her translation, *A Rainbow for the Christian West*.

⁴⁴ These include the church bombing in Birmingham, Alabama that killed 4 little girls, and ended up stirring crucial support for the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Depestre makes allusions to this event in the opening of the *Arc-en-ciel*.

Arc-en-ciel cuts across boundaries of race, nation, and ideology in order to exorcise the “West” and enact the emergence of a global poetics of mobility and connectedness that can confront and resist the violence promised by the new technoscientific and military age.

What does it mean to write, not about, but through Voodoo in 1967? The religion was, and to a large extent still is, extremely controversial, not officially acknowledged within Haiti itself until 2003, despite being practiced by the vast majority of Haitians. In *Dieu dans le vaudou haïtien*, Laënnec Hurbon explains that practicing Voodoo was one of the black slaves’ first forms of cultural resistance against their masters. He argues that slaves viewed Voodoo “comme leur langage propre, comme leur lieu de différenciation d’avec le monde des maîtres et comme la force qui décuplera leur capacité de combat” (“as their own language, as the site where they differ from the world of the masters and as the force that will augment their ability to fight”; 76). In turn, the *Code Noir* outlawed the religion, recognizing it as a source of slave cohesion and revolt:

Interdisons tous exercices d'autre Religion que de la Catholique, Apostolique & Romaine ; Voulons que les contrevenans soient punis comme rebelles & désobéissans à nos Commandemens. Défendons toutes assemblées pour cet effet, lesquelles Nous déclarons conventicules, illicites & séditeuses [...] (Article III)

We forbid all practice of a religion other than the Roman Catholic Apostolic; We want that the trespassers be punished as rebels and disobedient to our commandments. We forbid all gatherings to this end, which we declare conventicles, illicit and seditious [...]

Already in the 17th century, then, Voodoo was of official political

concern. And even after Haitian independence, the religion continued to be suppressed by the majority of local governments, in view of both restricting its potential to incite revolt and presenting a more Westernized image. According to Hurbon, the various religious and secular laws prohibiting this “culte honteux de primitifs” sought to maintain a semi-colonial social structure built upon the exploitation of the majority of the population (“shameful primitive cult”; 21). The goal was to discourage “toute prise de conscience réelle par les masses des contradictions économiques et des antagonismes sociaux” by diverting “vers un niveau imaginaire le véritable lieu de combat du paysan haïtien, qui est le système économique, social et politique” (“all real understanding of the economic contradictions and social antagonisms by the masses”; “towards an imaginary level the real fighting space of the Haitian peasant, which is the economic, social and political system”; 29-30).

Depestre’s youth coincided not only with the U.S. occupation of Haiti, but also with Haiti’s violent anti-superstition campaign of the early 40s. He is already taking a political stance, then, in engaging with Voodoo to nourish his poetic imagination. In a brief commentary of Depestre, Hurbon writes that, unlike previous authors such as Jacques Roumain and Jacques-Stéphen Alexis, who wrote about Voodoo as destined to disappear eventually through conversion or industrialization, Depestre approaches Voodoo in a novel way. He endeavors to “relire la situation haïtienne à partir du point de vue vaudouisant,” valorizing Voodoo as a dynamic, subversive practice that can oppose continuing cultural domination (“reread the Haitian situation from the

Voodoo follower's point of view"; 43). He connects with the popular vitality and revolutionary origins of the religion in order to address the ongoing global effects of colonization and imperialist capitalism.⁴⁵ We are not far here from the ideas of Homi Bhabha regarding cultural difference and the rearticulation of the global "from the perspective of the signifying position of the minority that resists totalization" (232-3). For Depestre, the elements of Voodoo that made it the perfect spark for maroon revolt continue to pose conceptual challenges to pure, monolithic views of culture that sustain Western domination. In *Arc-en-ciel*, Voodoo, which has been for so long suppressed by Christianity and seen as antithetical to a mythical secular Western society, haunts its dominant Other as a source of moral purification and revitalized ties with the spiritual world. It furthermore functions as the delocalized site from which a performative, rhizomatic speech emerges, reconnecting in a novel way with humanist ideals that the Christian West seems to have betrayed.

The *Arc-en-ciel*'s hyphenated subtitle, "poème-mystère vaudou," signals the creation of a new, hybrid and performative mode of speech ("Voodoo Mystery-Poem"). While Voodoo is already syncretic in itself, as a combination of diverse African and Catholic elements, Depestre's subtitle places his text at the site of cultural difference. *Mystère* can refer both to the secret cults of Ancient Greece and Rome, and to the theatrical, biblical representations of the Middle Ages. The subtitle thus draws upon distinct traditions from Europe and Haiti, framing the text as simultaneously religious and profane, but also as

⁴⁵ For more on this point see Dayan, *Rainbow* p.9-10.

something between writing and performance that relies on the intermingling of individual and collective dimensions of experience. This work is meant not only to be read, but also to be enacted as ritual. Voodoo is no longer presented as a superstition or “signe de non-civilisation,” but rather as a flexible and creative practice that can be used to revive and (re)generate connections between disparate systems of belief, thought and performance, including those that have long been forgotten in the West (“mark of non-civilization”; 20).

The poetic ritual’s initial object is an allegorical family of the American South, the white family of an Alabama judge. The sons and daughters branch into the major institutions of American society (military, politics, the home, etc.). They embody the clichés of justice, order, respectability and virtue and at the same time the hypocrisy behind this façade of ‘family values’:

Une belle famille debout dans son écume !
Une noble famille qui sait faire famille...
Une famille bien américaine
Participant à fond à tous ce qui
Mène l’Amérique à la catastrophe...
Une famille appelant à la rescousse
À la fois Jésus et le Ku Klux Klan
La Bombe H et la Chaise Électrique
Et la Statue de la Liberté !" (180)

A beautiful family standing up in its scum!
A noble family that knows how to act like a family...
A proper American family
Participating wholly in all that
Leads America to catastrophe...
A family calling to the rescue
Jesus and the Ku Klux Klan together
The H Bomb and the Electric Chair
And the Statue of Liberty!

Depestre plays with the idea of the family as the representative nucleus

of the nation. The speaker will enact the “merveille de désintégrer l’atome de la famille!” (“the miracle of splitting the family atom”). In a world overshadowed by the atom bomb, the speaker’s words thus aim to explode the unity and essentialism of the idea of “America” in order to confront it with another America, to make its difference visible, to make its violence visible. The internal inequalities and injustices and worldwide aggression of the United States are thus symbolized by this family of the American South.

The “Prelude” begins as the possessed narrator, a messenger of the Haitian gods (*loa*), speaks to this white family, addressing it through a “vous” that uneasily coincides with the position of the reader. The very first lines convey the dialectic progression from an antithetical confrontation to hopeful synthesis that motivates the entire collection: “Oui je suis un nègre-tempête/ Un nègre racine d’arc-en-ciel.” The echo “oui”/”suis” launches the text with an affirmation through negativity. The ironic apposition in the first line makes “nègre” synonymous with the devastating tempest, but the speaking subject immediately also portrays himself as an emblem of beauty and peace after the storm, suggesting that confrontation is a necessary step toward connectedness. The narrator enters a kind of cumulative metamorphosis, taking on diverse identifications, from forces of nature to figures like Abraham Lincoln, creating a site for a resistant, transformative speech to arise. The speaker addresses the white family and the reader from the beyond: from beyond the self, the present, or the rootedness of any place.

Mon cœur se serre comme un poing
Pour frapper au visage les faux dieux

[...]La foudre sur vos toits, c'est moi !
Le vent qui brise tout, c'est moi !
Le virus qui ne pardonne pas, c'est moi !
Les désastres à la Bourse, c'est moi !
De bon cœur mon soleil signe tous vos fléaux !
Je suis une petite fille
Qui traverse un torrent de fiel
Chaque matin pour se rendre à l'école !
Et tel le pasteur noir qui remue
Les cendres encore vives de son église
Je remue les légendes de ma vie

I am the thunder on your roofs!
I am the wind shattering all!
I am the virus that does not spare!
I am the disasters at the Stock Exchange!
Gladly my sun signs all your plagues!
I am a little girl
Crossing a torrent of gall
Every morning to go to school!
And like the black pastor who stirs up
The still living ashes of his church
I stir up the legends of my life

In response to racism associating blacks with all manner of social evils (Munro 178-179), the speaker takes on the voice of a vengeful but just god, declaring that he truly embodies forces of destruction. This is a gesture reminiscent of McKay's "To the White Fiends," whose first stanza evokes the possibility of retaliation against white violence ("Be not deceived, for every deed you do/I could match--out-match"). The narrator then immediately evokes tragic moments marking the Civil Rights Movement, identifying with the victims of racist violence, martyrs of his race from whom he gathers the strength to counteract. The *Arc-en-ciel* begins, then, as a confrontation of "white Western Christian civilization" with "colored mankind," to borrow the terms of Richard Wright (651-652).

The reader witnesses an absolute reversal of power as the speaker declares his revolt against the injustice of his white antagonists. Above all, this revolt manifests itself as a reversal of the positions of speech and silence. The narrator must make space for his speech, and that of the Voodoo gods possessing him, simultaneously silencing the voices of the white oppressors.

Je suis venu empailler vos lois féroces
Je vais garder dans l'alcool vos prières
Vos ruses vos tabous vos histoires de blancs !
[...]Le petit Christ qui souriait en moi
Hier soir je l'ai noyé dans l'alcool
De même j'ai noyé les Tables de la loi
De même j'ai noyé tous vos saints sacrements
Ma collection de papillons ce sont les monstres
Que vous avez lâché sur mes rêves d'homme noir
Monstres de Birmingham monstres de Prétoria
Me voici un nègre tout neuf,
Je me sens enfin moi-même.

I have come to stuff your ferocious laws
I will preserve your prayers in alcohol
Your tricks your taboos your white man's lies! [...]
The little Christ who was smiling in me
Last night I drowned him in alcohol
Likewise I drowned the Tablets of the Law
Likewise I drowned all your sacred sacraments
My butterfly collection is the monsters
That you loosed on my black man's dreams
Birmingham monsters Pretoria monsters [...]
Here I am a brand new negro,
I finally feel like myself.

In this passage, the narrator frames his speech as an act of revolt and declares the silencing of the West's discursive instruments of social and moral order. These are nevertheless preserved for memory. We see the speaker mocking the zoologist's desire for rational mastery over the natural world. In the process, he is no longer an object at the mercy of Western science, religion

or law. He is transformed into a “nègre tout neuf,” a “New Negro,” who rejects the oppressive lies of a Christian West built by and for white domination. He announces his revolt against the monstrous “vous” who created the Black Codes, the Jim Crow laws, the Apartheid laws, who justified centuries of slavery, segregation and abuse, lynching and murder, all in the name of God and Civilization. In the *Rage de vivre* collection, Depestre adds a final section to the “Prelude,” in the form of prose poetry beginning with “Ce soir toutes vos idoles sont vouées au silence. Il y aura seulement ce bruit de hache dans la forêt primitive de vos hypocrisies” (“tonight all your idols are confined to silence. The only thing remaining in the primeval forest of your hypocrisies will be this ax sound”; 180). The cliché image of the primitive forest is also reversed here, now associated with the violent desires and “rites sanglants” of the West. The image of an ax (“hache”), along with the direct mention of the name Abraham (“Et Abraham ce soir c’est moi!”), evokes the betrayed ideals of both Lincoln and Abraham-father-in-faith. Through the emblematic Southern family, the speaker stages a violent ritual of purification that ultimately seeks to bring white Western Christian civilization to true human justice. The imposing voice of the West is temporarily silenced, and it is forced to listen to the voices of its others and view its own monstrous behaviors. This is the role of the sixteen epiphanies, Depestre’s theatrical interpretation and presentation of the Voodoo *loa* and their encounter with the allegorical family of the American South.

The problem of speaking out and breaking the monologue of a white

world is posed directly in the epiphany of Cap'tain Zombi. The figure of the zombie and the neologism zombification are particularly important for Depestre and recur frequently in his poetic and theoretical writings. For Depestre, the zombie is an incarnation of the powerless situation of so many Haitians, blacks, and inhabitants of the Third World, for all those dominated by the West be it at a distance, or from within. Cap'tain Zombi's epiphany is remarkably different from the fifteen others. First, as Joan Dayan notes, he is not an actual *loa* of the Voodoo pantheon (83). Rather, Depestre creates him specifically to give voice to an absolutely subjugated figure. And while the *loa*'s speech relies on an almost ethnographic attention to characteristics of Haitian Voodoo ritual performance (popular nicknames, physical attributes, sacred objects, modes of speaking), Cap'tain Zombi remains a perpetually decomposing body, his senses jumbled, demanding only that his speech be acknowledged.

Écoutez monde blanc
Mon rugissement de zombi
Écoutez mon silence de mer
Ô chant désolé de nos morts
[...]Écoutez monde amer monde blanc
Mon chant d'agonie ma vie ce chant
Qui marie en mon corps le vent
Et la vague, le ciel et l'enfer ! 193

Listen white world
To my zombie-roaring
Listen to my sea-silence
Oh desolate chant of our dead [...]
Listen bitter white world
To my song of death my life this song
Joining within my body, wind
And wave, heaven and hell!

We immediately notice that, unlike the speech of the *loa*, Cap'tain Zombi's words are not directed at the representative Alabama family, but rather directly at the "white world." The echo of Wright's *White Man Listen!* punctuates the second and fourth stanzas of the poem, with the imperative "listen" appearing insistently throughout. Wright's denunciation of a white Christian West that continues to commit "wholesale denials of humanity," under a cover of justice and respectability is echoed throughout the *Arc-en-ciel pour l'Occident chrétien*, beginning with the title itself (721). In Cap'tain Zombi's epiphany, a white world is commanded to listen to the roaring silence of its victims, evoked also through the onomatopoeic moaning sounds dominating this section, a roar which becomes a lament of agony – both suffering and ongoing struggle – addressed to Africa. The "silence de mer" is not only a historical reference to the millions lost to the sea during the Middle Passage, but also the result of a continuing cultural and symbolic silencing. Cap'tain Zombi, a being somewhere between death and life, "peuplé de cadavres," gives a voice to the millions whose haunting stories have been suppressed. His role is to keep the memory of violence alive ("populated by corpses"). Now, silence and speech are momentarily reversed and it is the white world that must listen: listen to the voices of the undead, listen to the history of suffering it has caused, listen to the story of its own corruption.

We should note that the "white world" and the "Christian West" are not simple racial, religious or geopolitical designations. Depestre's seeming essentializations are part of a dialectic process that confronts, critiques, and

transforms the mythical images of purity that the West projects of *itself*. The *Arc-en-ciel* ultimately diffracts these names. The “Sud amer” is thus not exactly equivalent to the American South. Rather, it is a caricature focusing on a certain mentality: the comforting image of moral and cultural righteousness supported by the worst aspects of racial oppression. In the “Cantate à sept voix” of the female *loa*, “The South” becomes a deracialized symbol for human suffering and is turned into the “Sud de la douleur humaine” and the “Sud de toutes les races” (“the South of human pain”; “the South of every race”). These familiar terms (White, Christian, West, South) thus function more as synonyms for positions of enunciation and modes of speech, thought or action, regardless of language, race, or nation. In the collection, they act as characters reconstructed by the poems, representing both a powerful imperialist essence as well as a being fraught with division. Finally, the “Christian West” is an entity trapped in a state of disconnectedness from the natural and spiritual worlds, from the world of Man, and from the ideals it itself pretends to strive towards. It is this growing separation that the *Arc-en-ciel*’s poetic ritual seeks to bring to consciousness and begin to heal.

From the scene of possession in Alabama that constituted a confrontation of whiteness and color, the *Arc-en-ciel* shifts towards the more fundamental confrontation of mankind with itself. The final section, “Pour un nouvel âge du cœur humain,” is a trilogy of poems that develop a vision of the nuclear present as a final manifestation of the same alienation that has fueled racial oppression for centuries. In the first poem of the final trilogy, Depestre’s

gaze falls upon Omaha. The sound play turns Omaha into the setting of the struggle of man against Man, as Depestre strikingly declares: “C’est ici/Que l’homme avec ardeur prépare la fin de l’homme” (It is here/ That man passionately prepares the end of man”). The name Omaha already evokes the displacement of the Native American tribe once living on this territory, remarking an original injustice. Furthermore, as the site of Strategic Air Command, and the home of the bombers that struck Hiroshima and Nagasaki, it becomes a symbol of American militarist capitalism, metonymically associated with the arms race. Arriving in Omaha, the loa encounter the Christian West’s new gods:

Mes dieux végétaux reculent d’épouvante
Devant eux sont alignés
Les grands dieux de l’âge nucléaire
Les fabricants de soleils homicides
Les Atlas, les Titans, les Polaris
Les Minutemen, les Nike-Zeus
Les Sidewinder et les Hound-Dog
Les assassins de l’espace et du temps
Je traduis pour mes dieux
Les messages secrets
Que ces missiles envoient à la terre !
“À bas l’être humain
À bas les étoiles [...]
Demain, la Bombe H !”

My organic gods withdraw in horror
Before them lined up
The great gods of the nuclear age
The creators of homicidal suns
The Atlases, the Titans, the Polaris
The Minutemen, the Nike-Zeuses
The Sidewinders and the Hound-Dogs
The assassins of space and time
I translate for my gods
The secret messages
That these missiles send to the earth!

“Down with mankind
Down with stars [...]
Tomorrow, the H-Bomb!”

These are the atomic gods man has created in his image, gods filled with fear and hatred, unnatural gods demanding universal destruction. “Through a sharp reversal, Christianity emerges as black magic, offering pagan homage to the barbaric gods of Omaha,” comments Joan Dayan (101). This reversal is doubled by the fact that the names of Greek gods that the West proudly lays claim to and associates with its origins are now paradoxically used to christen the missiles that threaten to annihilate it. In transforming these weapons into deities, the *Arc-en-ciel* makes the mythology of the nuclear age all the more visible. From Trinity onward, the United States zealously expanded its nuclear program, spurred by the conviction that the possibility of mutually assured destruction was the only safe horizon. By 1967, the year *Arc-en-ciel* was first published, the number of U.S. warheads had reached its all-time peak (Cochran *et al.* 12). Depestre translates this staggering proliferation in religious terms, emphasizing the obsession with unlimited power and violence that partly motivated the arms race. The 42-line “A bas...” chant of the missiles demanding total destruction illustrates this perverse fascination quite clearly (“Down with...”). “Les Dieux atomiques d’Omaha” thus depicts the West’s worship of the technoscientific as it embarks upon the path of a massive military development, abandoning the natural and threatening to break all ties to the ideals of Man.

This first poem of the trilogy also reveals an extreme asymmetry in

power that must be acknowledged. Here, we see a dramatic contrast with the beginning of the *Arc-en-ciel*. Confronted with these “porteurs d’étoiles meurtrières,” it seems as though the speaker and his gods are rendered helpless, “impuissants/Désarmés et vaincus par ces nouveaux dieux” (“carriers of murderous stars”; “powerless/ Disarmed and conquered by these new gods”). We can recall that in the last poem of the epiphanies, “Le bain du petit matin,” the Voodoo gods perform a cleansing baptismal ceremony, confident of the ritual’s effectiveness: “Cette eau combattrait vos hystéries, vos manies, vos trahisons” (“this water will fight your hysterias, your manias, your betrayals”). In Omaha, however, their spiritual forces are overwhelmed, “Et ils tremblent les pères de mes racines/ Ils ne connaissent pas de source ni de feuilles/ Pour laver le visage et le cœur d’Omaha” (“And the fathers of my roots tremble/ They know of no spring or leaf/ To wash the face and heart of Omaha”). The network of “H” sounds further underlines this shift: whereas in the “Prelude” the speaker had invoked the symbolic power of the “hache,” dauntlessly seeking to bring justice to the South, this simple weapon is of course no match for the “Bombe H.”

In an important sense, then, “Les Dieux atomiques d’Omaha” questions the efficacy of the entire ritual we have observed. It is therefore difficult not to also read these lines on the level of a reflexive commentary on the powers of art in relation to historical and political forces. If the world is moved by so much hatred that it is prepared to accept self-destruction, what hope can there be that the imaginary arms of a poet could change anything? The remaining

two poems of the trilogy offer their own complementary perspectives on this question: art can create hope and spiritual renewal, and it can provide a call to action and an intense experience of revolt.

In “Notre-dame des cendres,” Depestre uses the flexibility of Voodoo to construct a hybrid deity that could offer the hope of guidance towards a better future. He addresses a prayer to H  l  ne, once again evoking the West’s mythic origins. This “douce H  l  ne de la connaissance” is currently stranded in Omaha as a result of the Faustian bargain through which the West has betrayed both spirituality and knowledge “sweet Helen of knowledge”). Depestre’s treatment of H  l  ne also represents a criticism of Senghor’s famous aphorism “l’  motion est n  gre comme la raison hell  ne” (“emotion is Negro as reason is Hellenic”). It is not the rational as such that poses a problem, but rather the separation between reason and emotion. However, the speaker calls to her, begging her to abandon the monstrous form she has taken and transforming her into a goddess guiding the construction of a “nouvel   ge du coeur humain” (“new age of the human heart”). Joan Dayan’s commentary comes to an end with some interesting reflections on this poem.

“The essential prelude to any new life is the appearance of a new, redeeming symbol. [Depestre’s] construction of a living, universal goddess from the ashes of a decaying world will be the symbol. The H bomb is a product of man’s perversion of knowledge, his mechanical dissociation of mind from the vital sensuality of body. Depestre will combat that perversity through his incarnation of knowledge as a woman. [...] A representation of the eternal feminine, she can stand as Helen of Troy, Venus, or an erotic Virgin Mary. [...] Inaccessible to final identification, she operates beyond culture, beyond race, and comes into being in the universal.” (98)

For Dayan, the *Arc-en-ciel* closes with this utopian prayer towards peace and regeneration, and the critic optimistically declares that “Depestre’s deification is the weapon against the atomic gods of Omaha” (105). This interpretation, however, eschews the question of reflexivity and gives the collection a clearer resolution than it seems to have. Indeed, one of the most striking aspects of this poem in the context of the trilogy is the transparency with which Hélène suddenly, yet naturally, appears. The hope of spiritual regeneration depends as much on this new symbol as on the demonstration of its construction. The images of Hélène are inseparable from the personification, apostrophes, rhetorical questions, imperatives and anaphoras molding and transforming this goddess as the speaker prays to her.

While “Notre-dame des cendres” mimics the rhythms and devices of prayer, the final poem of the trilogy, “Romancero d’une petite lampe” changes tone once again, becoming a declaration of faith and a call to action. “Romancero” attempts to synthesize the entire scope of the *Arc-en-ciel*’s ritual performance, making it clear that hope and spiritual regeneration are neither intrinsic to poetry nor miracles to be waited for, but rather require active resistance. This idea corresponds to the declaration we find in the “Prelude”: “Je ne reste plus assis sous un arbre/ Dans l’attente de vos miracles” (“I no longer remain sitting under a tree/ In wait of your miracles”). Beginning with a refusal of the central Catholic doctrine, *salus extra ecclesiam non est*, the speaker insists that it is only within the power of men to save mankind from its ever darker fate.

Il n'y a de salut pour l'homme
Que dans un grand éblouissement
De l'homme par l'homme je l'affirme
Moi un nègre solitaire dans la foule
Moi un brin d'herbe solitaire
Et sauvage je le crie à mon siècle
Il n'y aura de joie pour l'homme
Que dans un pur rayonnement
De l'homme par l'homme un fier
Élan de l'homme vers son destin
Qui est de briller très haut
Avec l'étoile de tous les hommes

There is no salvation for Man
Except through a great dazzling
Of Man by Man, I affirm it
I, a solitary Negro in the crowd
I, a solitary blade of grass
And savagely I cry out to my century
There will be no joy for Man
Except through a pure radiance
Of Man by Man a proud
Surge of Man towards his destiny
Which is to shine high up
With the star of all mankind

We immediately note that “homme” appears no less than eight times in these lines. Much like the deification of Hélène in the previous poem, “homme” accumulates an incantatory force against that of Omaha and the “Bombe H.” Moreover, Omaha’s “étoiles meurtrières” are replaced with a new network of light imagery. The speaker no longer holds the vengeful, violent tone of the “Prelude,” nor the overwhelming disappointment of “Dieux atomiques.” Rather, faced with the tragedies of the past and a looming apocalyptic vision, he adamantly insists on an awareness of his smallness and solitude, but also on his power as an individual nonetheless. The “grand éblouissement” actually depends on humble individual action, reframing the

entire collection in this light. This is no longer a prayer, “Non un grand poème à genoux/ Sur la dalle de la douleur/ Mais une petite lampe haïtienne,” a small, fragile contribution to bringing mankind out of darkness (“Not a great poem on its knees/ Before the slab of sorrow/ But a little Haitian lamp”). We can see now that a dialogue with the ideas of Claude McKay runs throughout Depestre’s text.⁴⁶ From the “Prelude” to the “Romancero,” *Arc-en-ciel* performs an epic expansion of McKay’s “To the White Fiends,” moving from retaliatory provocation to hopeful reconciliation.

Finally, we should turn to the haunting image of the rainbow. It weaves its way throughout the text, from the title, to the first lines, to the stories of dead black heroes such as Toussaint Louverture and Patrice Lumumba, narrated by the female gods. In Voodoo, as in Christianity, the symbol of the rainbow connects the material and spiritual worlds. Rainbows have no specific place, they are ephemeral phenomena located entirely in the relationship between the elements and perception. The interstitial site of the rainbow is a particularly apt symbol, then, for Depestre’s poetics of revolt and for the diffraction of Whiteness and its Christian West. It confronts whiteness with color, not merely by juxtaposing them, but above all by confronting whiteness with itself, by making visible only a continuous spectrum that refuses divisions or demarcations. The *Arc-en-ciel* can thus be read as the gift of a transient vision, the denunciation of oppressive historical categories constraining the present and the apparition a limitless spiritual and poetic world that can work

⁴⁶ In the final version of the *Arc-en-ciel*, Depestre directly quotes McKay in an epigraph to this final poem.

to resist and undo their destructive forces.

3.3—Politics of the Masculine Voice

One can quite easily observe that central to the *Arc-en-ciel pour l'Occident chrétien*, and to Depestre's entire literary *oeuvre*, is what he has termed a "solar eroticism." He speaks of this thematic and aesthetic principle as follows in *Métier a métisser*:

Le côté païen et solaire de mon tempérament d'Homme de la Caraïbe situe d'emblée ma vision de l'amour à l'inverse de l'expérience douloureuse qui a marqué l'aventure de l'Eros occidental. Ce dolorisme existentiel est sans doute à l'origine des sentiments de honte, de tristesse et de culpabilité que la pornographie contribue à entretenir autour de la vie sexuelle aux dépens de la bonne et belle célébration de l'acte d'amour. (125)

The pagan and solar side of my Caribbean disposition immediately locates my vision of love at the opposite of the painful experience that marks the Western Eros. This essential dolorism is without doubt at the origin of the feelings of shame, sadness and culpability that pornography contributes to maintaining around sexual life at the expense of the good and beautiful celebration of the act of love.

Intended as sexually liberating, Depestre's poetry thus celebrates a certain eroticism, a gesture which is meant to have counter-cultural and anti-capitalist aspirations. As Dash explains, for Depestre, sex is used as a "weapon against a world of hypocrisy, phoniness, and repressions—his miraculous weapon aimed at the self-righteous, Christian West" (*The Other America* 125). This militant intention is especially true of the *Arc-en-ciel*, where Depestre's representations of stereotyped Western sexuality clash with the supposedly liberated and liberating sexuality of the Haitian *loa*. However, in this new, sexually-emancipated universe, it is difficult to find any portrayals of women that do not reduce them to submissive or idealized objects of desire. In this

section, I sketch out a possible feminist or contrapuntal reading that raises some questions regarding eroticism and the politics of the male voice in Depestre's work. I focus especially on the *Arc-en-ciel*'s representations of the female body, femininity and eroticism, but also discuss other poems.

As I described in the previous section, in the "Epiphanies" of *Un Arc-en-ciel pour l'Occident chretien*, one by one fifteen male *loa* of the Voodoo pantheon (along with Capt'ain Zombi) make themselves present in the foyer of an Alabama judge. Speaking according to certain characteristics of their respective powers and personalities, they directly address this white Southern family, humbling the men and women, transforming them into ritual objects and even zombis. The "Epiphanies" form a scene of vengeance that precedes the purifying baptismal bath of the ritual, the female *loa*'s eulogies of universal black heroes, and the reconciliatory movements closing the collection. What interests me here in particular is the explicit sexual possession of the women in this scene by several of the *loa*, and the way it has been justified by critics as a kind of structural necessity.

For reference, here are just a couple of examples from Depestre's text:

"Damballah-Wèdo":
Si vous voyez une couleuvre verte
Danser avec l'aînée de vos filles, c'est moi !
Si vous voyez un arc-en-ciel embrasser
Avec fureur son pubis c'est de nouveau moi ! [...]
Je suis vaudou-l'arc-en-ciel
Et la fille aînée d'un Juge de l'Alabama
Va perdre son bonnet blanc sur mes rivages !

If you see a green snake
Dancing with the eldest of your daughters, it's me!
If you see a rainbow kissing

Her pubis furiously it's again me! [...]
I am the voodoo-rainbow
And the eldest daughter of an Alabama Judge
Will lose her white cap on my shores!

“Chango”:
Ô filles blanches de l’Alabama prosternez-vous
Aux pieds de mon innocence
Et quittez vos vêtements
Je plonge la main dans l’huile chaude
Et très lentement je frotte vos seins maudits
Je frotte l’ivoire rebelle de vos membres
Qui émergent peu à peu des ténèbres
Je frotte un à un vos sexes émerveillés
Vous voici aussi pures que mes yeux
Vous voici prêtes à porter dans vos entrailles
Tout l’éclat de la vie au matin de l’humain !

"Chango"
O white girls of Alabama bow down
To the feet of my innocence
And take off your clothes
I plunge my hand into the hot oil
And very slowly I rub your cursed breasts
I rub the rebellious ivory of your limbs
Emerging slowly from the darkness
I rub one by one your amazed sexes
Here you are as pure as my eyes
You are now ready to carry in your womb
All the splendor of life on the morning of Man!

What the reader sees here is not the invocation of these *loa*, but rather a literary representation of their moment of possession of the poet-houngan. The *loa* speak their incantatory gestures of confrontation, their anger, mockery, and virile affirmations through the medium of the poem, through the constantly shifting poetic “I”, through the voice of “frère Depestre”. As Bernadette Cailler has argued, Depestre is not copying the form or content of any actual ceremony, but rather creating a Voodoo-inspired adaptation of ritual structure and symbolism (50). While the drums, music, dancing and

trances of Voodoo are inevitably lost, Depestre goes to great lengths to “overcome the limitations of Voodoo put into words”⁴⁷ (53). Elements such as the individual *vévés* and rhythms emphasize the text’s gesture towards the theatrical and performative.

From here, two principal explanations seem relevant, one ethnographic and the other didactic, both carrying their respective political implications. The first would be that these scenes reflect Depestre’s creative transposition of the sexual element of Voodoo ritual itself. While intercourse or sexual acts are not part of Voodoo ceremonies, these are sublimated into dances and stylized movements (Deren 1985). Voodoo practitioners can partake in mocking, obscene and almost grotesque representations of intercourse, as is the case in many kinds of rites of passage throughout the world (Turner 92). One could claim, then, that Depestre is merely transposing this erotic energy into his verse. This interpretation would make the *loa*’s speech partly humorous,⁴⁸ a culturally authentic form of exaggerating masculinity in order to mock it, as is clearly visible in a line such as Guédé Nibo’s “mon phallus mesure un demi-mètre”⁴⁹ (“my phallus is three meters long”).

⁴⁷ Cailler explains that “le lecteur mesure peut-être l’effort entrepris par le poète pour dépasser les limites du Vaudou mis en mots, en tout cas, se prend à rêver des dimensions proprement dramatiques du rite” (“the reader measures perhaps the effort undertaken by the poet to exceed the limits of the Voodoo put into words, in any case, takes to dreaming specifically dramatic dimensions of the rite”; 53).

⁴⁸ Cailler has remarked that “Ce masque du violeur, assumé par le narrateur, est naturellement inséparable de l’humour mordant qui partout sature le texte” (“This masque of the rapist, assumed by the narrator, is naturally inseparable from the biting love which saturates the text everywhere”; 52). I would add that this seems to be true for some of the *loa*, such as Ogou-Badagris, Guédé Nibo and Azaka-Médé; however, not all of the *loa*’s speeches appear humorous.

⁴⁹ Thomas Spear provides a brief, rather polemic critique of this kind of sexual exaggerations in Caribbean literature.

Remaining on this ethnographic level, what we see in these scenes of sexual possession would be the erotic element of a larger reversal of power. In her commentary of *Arc-en-ciel*, Dayan explains that “the spasms of the dance are linked to the dynamic fusion of the sexual act. Both operate together to possess the South” (*Rainbow* 74). Women *and* men are thus differently incorporated into a ritual that gives expression to the violent fantasy of a reversal of the roles of colonizer and colonized. Dayan explains that “they will be used as mere instruments, just as the Blacks have been used for centuries. But with one important difference. The Whites reduced the Black to a slave for material gains, and we shall see that Depestre has transformed this ‘noble family’ of Alabama with the ultimate vision of spiritual rebirth for all men” (53).

This interpretative path remains at the level of a “magico-poetic experience” with the ultimate dialectical purpose of spiritual rebirth (Cailler 50). Just like the white family members and the communities they symbolize, the reader also “devrait sortir transformé, purifié” (“should emerge transformed, purified”; 50). He or she passes through the humbling parts of this ritual in the ambivalent position of witness/participant, finally reaching the “image interculturelle du baptême” and the regenerative final movements of the collection (“intercultural image of baptism”; 50). Cailler explains that the purpose of any Voodoo ceremony is to reinforce “les liens du croyant a sa communauté, passée et présente; par ailleurs, de l’expérience religieuse devrait naître un être meilleur, enrichi par son contact avec les forces

cosmiques” (“the links between the believer and his community, past and present; besides, religious experience should give birth to a better being, enriched by his contact with the cosmic forces”; 50). This interpretation is supported by Victor Turner’s understanding of the cathartic purpose of ritualized obscene behavior that is otherwise proscribed. This “prescribed obscenity” is common to many rites of passage:

What we are confronted with in the [these] rites is in fact a domestication of those wild impulses, sexual and aggressive [...]. The raw energies released in overt symbolisms of sexuality and hostility between the sexes are channeled toward master symbols representative of structural order, and values and virtues on which that order depends. Every opposition is overcome or transcended in a recovered unity, a unity that, moreover, is reinforced by the very potencies that endanger it. One aspect of ritual is shown by these rites to be a means of putting at the service of the social order the very forces of disorder that inhere in man’s mammalian constitution. (92-93)

These scenes could thus be read as a poetic recuperation of power, a vengeful fantasy of reciprocity of violence between the writer, his mainly Western community of readers, and the wider human community beyond, in order to arrive at mutual recognition and true communion.

Related to this ethnographic dimension, there is a second interpretative component to consider. Cailler convincingly argues that the Voodoo aesthetic of the collection “s’associe étroitement à un vœu didactique: cette lumière multicolore de l’esprit haïtien, offerte à l’Occident, voudrait faire voir, et conjointement inciter le ‘voyant’ à agir plus humainement, plus justement” (“is closely linked with a didactic wish: this multi-colored light of the Haitian spirit, offered to the West, seeks to give vision and simultaneously incite the

‘voyant’ to act more humanely, more justly”; 50). Recalling Depestre’s description of “solar eroticism” with which I opened this section, *Arc-en-ciel* also aims at a critique of what the poet sees as Western hypocritical prudishness and repressive, unnatural attitudes towards sexuality. A second branch of the didactic aims mentioned above would thus posit the joyful celebration of eroticism through Voodoo as opposed to its Western repression. There is clearly a slow, voyeuristic pleasure in describing Chango’s sexual possession, for instance, and in the epiphany of “Ogou-Badagris” we can see a playful and teasing chastising of Western sexual mores as the *loa* describes the desires of his “épée phallique”.

Mon épée est une implacable marée
Elle réclame pour sa soif
De chaudes odeurs femelles
Elle réclame pour sa faim du soir
Des rondeurs orgueilleuses et défendues [...]
Mon épée jette sur vos cinq filles
Son regard moqueur de dieu païen
Mon épée phallique d’Ogou-Badagris
Taquine la curiosité lascive
De cinq poules bien dressées
Par les gloussements de l’hystérie

My sword is a relentless tide
It calls for its thirst
Warm female odors
It calls for its evening hunger
Proud and forbidden curves [...]
My sword throws upon your five daughters
Its mocking gaze of a pagan god
My phallic sword Ogou-Badagris
Teases the lascivious curiosity
Of five hens well-trained
By the cluckings of hysteria

Depestre’s unleashing of the *loa*’s erotic force aims to make a point of

the contrast between the repressive Christian attitude to sex, and its harmonious incorporation into Voodoo belief, where it is presented as an inevitable, “eternal persistence of the erotic” (Deren 1985). Maya Deren’s description of Baron Samedi’s characteristics when possessing a participant in a ceremony clarifies the sexual attitude that Depestre is transposing here.

[Guédé] may invent variations on the theme of provocation, ranging from suggestive mischief to lascivious aggression. His greatest delight is to discover some one who pretends to piously heroic or refined immunity. He will confront such a one and expose him savagely, imposing upon him the most lascivious gestures and the most extreme obscenities. Thus he introduces men to their own devil, for whoever would consider sex as a sin creates and confronts, in Ghede, his own guilt” (Deren 1953, 92-93).

However, Deren’s commentary also makes it quite clear that possession by most of the *loa* is not necessarily sexual in nature. Depestre not only intensifies the erotic element, but also reinforces a male/female division that is not a part of actual rituals. As Cailler has remarked, the fact that it is only *male loa* that are in the position to possess the members of the white family means that there is a “ségrégation sexuelle certes inconnue du rite puisque un homme peut très bien être ‘possédé’ par ‘une,’ *loa* et vice-versa” (“sexual segregation which is certainly unknown to the rite since a man can very well be ‘possessed’ by ‘a [female]’ *loa* and and vice-versa”; 50). Dayan’s commentary, that “prayer emerges as a sexual dance; the universe itself becomes a great orgy of sexuality,” does not therefore seem accurate here (*Rainbow* 57). We do not see a cosmic celebration of sex at all, since the sexual possession is quite clearly unidirectional and gendered. The problem remains, then, that Depestre’s re-

newed community and sexually liberated, humanistic vision are formed partly through the celebration of the virile power of the heterosexual male: the idea of universal *Man* is salvaged partly through the fantasy of the sexually dominated and sacrificed bodies of women.

Interestingly, the few critics that have commented on these scenes feel the need to justify what is happening. Dayan, for example, comments that “dance and rape operate simultaneously through delirium to bring the South to a moment of intense agony that must precede rebirth” (*Rainbow* 73). This somewhat awkward statement betrays an impulse to rationalize the gendered violence. In a later article, however, Dayan is much more skeptical about Depestre’s use of eroticism, and provides an insightful critique of *Hadriana dans tous mes rêves*, where Depestre once again employs an “unfortunate reprise of the ‘every girl wants to be raped’ syndrome” (“France reads Haiti: Hadriana” 170). Bridget Jones, who is otherwise quite critical of what she sees as Depestre’s *machismo*, justifies the scenes of sexual violence against women on aesthetic grounds, claiming that “Depestre sends a number of the virile figures of the vaudou pantheon to humble the judge’s womenfolk, with results which are poetically very exciting” (25). Certainly, as Cailler notes, this mask of the “rapist” is just one of the many “masks” the narrator takes on in the “Prelude” and “Epiphanies” (as I mentioned in the previous section, he also identifies with Abraham, Christ, etc.). However, can it be uncritically assimilated with the others as merely a necessary part of a Voodoo aesthetic, ritual of rebirth or poetic project? Beyond the intended politics of the poet,

there is something undeniably “masculinist” about Depestre’s text, which manifests itself through an “aggressive heterosexual eroticism,” imbued with the voyeurism, revenge and punishment of a “super-male” (Arnold 17). Depestre’s *loa* seem to take the “predatory” perspective described by Albert Arnold, their “activities [...] justified—if need be—through the claim of verisimilitude” and sexual liberation (17).

A corollary of the problem of “segregation” by gender with respect to the act of possession is that the female *loa* appear only in the two sections of the *Arc-en-ciel* entitled “Cantate à sept voix” and “Les sept piliers de l’innocence,” and are rendered more or less passive. It is the male gods who travel to Alabama on their crusade and confront the atomic gods of Omaha, while the goddesses remain in Haiti, wondering where their men have gone off to: “Où sont passés nos *loa* mâles cette nuit?” asks Ayizan (“Where have our male *loas* gone tonight?”). “Je ne vois pas de vie d’homme pour arroser/ Ce soir mon bananier et mon maïs de femme,” exclaims Erzili (“I don’t see any man to water/ My banana tree and my woman’s corn this evening”). Their discussion reveals that the male “*loa* marchent ce soir/ [Dans...] le sang d’un poète pour arc-en-ciel” (“walk this evening/ [Through...] the blood of a poet for the rainbow”). Aïda Wèdo, whose symbol is the rainbow, protests at her exclusion from this event, since “Ma beauté signe tous les arcs-en-ciel!” (“My beauty signs all rainbows!”) The other female *loa* join in explaining that her powers are limited in this case. The men have crossed the sea and gone to fight the “monstre du siècle” that is the Ku Klux Klan (“monster of the century”). As

Simbi describes this monster's horrific forces, the female *loa* all express (in the future tense) what they will do to it should they encounter it:

AÏDA WÈDO
Si je le croise sous les eaux
De mes sept couleurs de femme
Je ferai sept nœuds coulants
Pour étrangler ses saisons!

If I cross it underwater
With my seven woman's colors
I will make seven nooses
To strangle its seasons!

However, their anger and impulse to act are subdued when Ayizan acknowledges their domestic limitations:

AYIZAN
Femmes pour le tuer
Il faut plus que des cris
Et des paroles de femme !

SIMBI
C'est pourquoi nos dieux mâles
Ne sont pas avec nous ce soir !

AÏDA WÈDO
Ils se battent au loin pour nous !

AYZAN
Women to kill it
It takes more than the cries
And words of a woman!

SIMBI
That's why our male gods
Are not with us tonight!

AÏDA WÈDO
They're fighting afar for us!

This section is no doubt meant to provide some comic relief after the

intensity of the “Epiphanies.” The repetition of “de femme” is partly a caricature of femininity. Depestre’s exaggeration of sexual division remains nonetheless problematic. It is the *Arc-en-ciel*’s structure and its internal justifications, rather than any authentic Voodoo characteristics of these female *loa*, that make it impossible for them to possess the white family alongside the males. Their only option is to take on the supporting role of storytellers, following human sociopolitical dictates rather than divine ones. They thus meld with other Caribbean “female figures of cultural transmission,” like “all those grandmothers or elderly aunts, those repositories of oral history, folk medicine, and stories of all sorts” (Arnold 11). They each sing a eulogy of a universal black (male) hero. While the male gods are in the position to act and affirm “Je suis,” the female gods can only recount the exploits of men from a passive position, where they can only say “Il était une fois” (“I am”; “Once upon a time”). Strikingly, the poetic voice identifies only with the male *loa*. In the “Epiphanies” we see an abundant repetition of the poetic “I” and “Here I am,” whereas in the “Sept piliers de l’innocence,” the female *loa* remain strangely other. They exclaim “There he is...” of a Makandal or an Antonio Maceo, and their own presence as subjects is almost entirely erased under the dominance of the pronoun “He.”

It is surprising to read Bernard Delpêche’s reliance on the very lines I quoted above to articulate a vehement rejection of an “interprétation soi-

disant sexiste”⁵⁰ (“an interpretation of supposed sexism”; 51). Delpêche argues that one cannot really speak of male and female gods here because we are dealing with the “cerebral” event of a poem and not an actual ritual; therefore, “le corps organique est dissout par le langage” (“the organic body is dissolved by language”; 52). According to Delpêche, the speaking subject and the gods transcend gender: “les voix des seize divinités mâles sont transmises par un actant parlant qui n’est ni homme ni femme. [...] La génitalité de ces *loa* est flottante” (“the voices of the sixteen male divinities are transmitted by a speaking actor who is neither man nor woman. [...] The genitality of these *loa* is unclear”; 52). Delpêche seems to conflate sex and gender here, as well as the physical body with its representation, resulting in the unsupportable claim that language, being beyond the physical body, intrinsically suspends gender. In fact, as I am trying to show throughout this section, it is precisely Depestre’s *language* (independent of actual ritual practices) that designates his *loa* as male and female and then relies on stereotyped gender divisions. The poetic expression of the *Arc-en-ciel* is far from neutral: the “I”s of the male gods assume a virile masculine voice and gaze, and when speech is ceded to the female gods, they know their place and accept their domestic limitations.

Finally, as we saw in the previous section, the collection closes with a trilogy of poems including “Notre-Dame des cendres,” where a new, hybrid deity emerges as a redeeming figure. Joan Dayan concludes her commentary

⁵⁰ Delpêche attacks Cailler’s article here, and I assume he means to reject an interpretation of Depestre’s exploitation of the Voodoo gods’ sexuality as sexist rather than a “sexist interpretation.”

with a generous discussion explaining that this goddess is “a representation of the eternal feminine, she can stand as Helen of Troy, Venus, or an erotic Virgin Mary. [...] Inaccessible to final identification, she operates beyond culture, beyond race” (*Rainbow* 98). She does not, however, operate beyond the realm of stereotyped male fantasy as she is implored by the poetic voice to abandon her disastrous betrayal “avec ces dieux barbares prodiguant/Ta bouche, te seins et ton sexe ébloui!” (“with these barbarian gods squandering/Your mouth, your breasts and your dazzled sex!”). Throughout the *Arc-en-ciel*, whether dominated or in a position of power, female figures can hardly escape their erotic objectification or idealization.⁵¹ What we see then, is what Luis Fernando Restrepo has described as a “politics articulated through the female form as the object of desire” (252). Allegorical bodies representing sexual hypocrisy in capitalist society; playful, divine bodies standing as national symbols or social metaphors or human ideals; bodies to be unveiled before the masculine gaze, explored and penetrated by a masculine voice.

It is not only in the *Arc-en-ciel* that we find this masculinist gaze upon the female body—indeed this kind of eroticism dominates much of Depestre’s later work, and has received some heavy criticism.⁵² Thomas Spear has

⁵¹ There is one notable exception to this, in the “Prelude,” where the “I” takes on diverse identifications including that of a little girl: “Je suis une petite fille/ Qui traverse un torrent de fiel/ Chaque matin pour se rendre à l’école!” (“I am a little girl/ Crossing a torrent of gall Every morning to go to school!”). This section could perhaps be compared with the multiple transformations and gender reversals in Rimbaud’s *Une saison en enfer*.

⁵² I should note that Depestre’s earlier work is much less centered on gender, and occasionally steps *beyond* gender divisions. “Pour l’enfant qui aura toujours seize ans,” for example, contains no gender markers. Both the speaking subject and the “Enfant” who is politically and erotically entreated remain in an interesting space of suspension in this poem. Depestre’s revised collection completely undoes this dimension, from the new title onward: “Poème de l’éternelle adolescente.” Another significant exception to the politics of gender that I discuss

commented on the “doudouist” tendency of Depestre’s later work, as well as the poet’s unwitting reproduction of the colonialist gaze (263). Bridget Jones also reminds us that, while Depestre may everywhere declare “his interest in a marvelous individual,” he nevertheless frequently uses the exploitative imagery of “femme-jardin,” “reducing her metaphorically to another half-acre of bush to be captured” (29). The most insightful critique of Depestre’s turn toward eroticism, however, remains Dayan’s “France reads Haiti.” Her article deals mainly with *Hadriana dans tous mes rêves*; however her analyses apply equally well to much of Depestre’s post-1967 work. Dayan remarks on “Depestre’s obsession with describing women’s anatomical parts as signs of plenitude and cause for rejoicing” and argues that “even while Depestre theorized about the reduction of blacks into commodities, he was often caught up in his own aesthetic conversion of women into ‘a social fetish,’ so many lovely bodies served up to recuperative male fantasy” (“France reads Haiti: Hadriana” 171; 163-164). Most significantly, she attributes Depestre’s literary success in France to the portrayal of a submissive or idealized womanhood which plays into old exotic fantasies about the Caribbean. Known as “the sensual writer of the islands,” Depestre promotes “the most cherished masculine mystifications even as [he] seems to subvert them” (“France reads Haiti: Hadriana” 172). Thus, in a poem such as “Autoportrait d’un volcan” (1976) we see a multiplication of exotic symbols of erotic force (“cheval,”

here can be found in a 1969 collection of essays, from which I drew this chapter’s epigraph. In his definition of literature, Depestre chooses to write “un homme ou une femme” instead of gender-neutral or masculine subjects like *écrivain* or the universal *homme* (“a man or a woman”).

“volcan,” “marée”), doubled by the fantasy of a multiplication of exploits on a global scale (as in the short story “Mémoires de géolibertinage”).

Un petit cheval innocent avec des yeux
Qui broutaient l’herbe fraîche
Des belles étudiantes
Et descendaient la pente de leurs corps
En poussant des cris de volcan!

A small horse with innocent eyes
That grazed the fresh grass
Of beautiful students
And descended the slope of their bodies
Shouting volcano cries!

Surprisingly, Depestre subsequently borrows what had been quite a powerful image from the *Arc-en-ciel*: the collection of colonialist monstrosities, which I commented on in the previous section. Here, just a few lines after declaring that “his volcano” had kept his collection of “fonctionnaires des colonies” up to date, he lists that, among other things his volcano was a “colonisateur de cuisses vierges” (“colonizer of virgin thighs”). It would be difficult to read the term “colonisateur” as an “innocent” metaphor or positive reappropriation given the poem’s saturation with historical and biographical references. It is also, quite clearly, part of an exploitative fantasy, perhaps illustrating Depestre’s declaration that he is now more interested in a “return to the flesh” than in theories of decolonization (“France reads Haiti: Interview” 149). In the same collection, “Images pour une anti-autobiographie,” Depestre seems to gesture toward Césaire, transforming the latter’s declaration of resistance to Western rationality through unassimilable

madness⁵³ into a rather benign, promiscuous sexuality:

2 arbres + 2 arbres dans ma vie
N'ont jamais fait quatre
Tandis que 2 femmes + 2 femmes ont toujours
Dans mon lit fait un seul arbre à fruits.
Je suis un trésor enfoui à mille mètres
Sous la terre de ma ville natale
Et quinze mille femmes affamées d'or pur
Me cherchent sans jamais me trouver.

2 trees + 2 trees in my life
Have never been four
While 2 women + 2 women have always
In my bed become a single fruit tree.
I am a treasure buried a thousand meters below
The ground of my hometown
And fifteen thousand women hungry for pure gold
Seek me without ever finding me.

Depestre's "solar eroticism" assumes that capitalist society represses sexuality to maintain docile subjects within an oppressive class structure. In such lines, he may therefore wish to use sexuality as a terrain of unrestrained excess from which to attack capitalism without having to resort to Marxist discourse. Bridget Jones explains that, "love figures in the onslaught on the old world, reward of the militant if not his right. The precocious lover also joins in shocking the bourgeois to death, always an appealing pastime" (27-28). Furthermore, Jones hints at the futility of even the most explicit verse, and wonders "whether the erotic dimension in Depestre's work does not also function almost as a safety valve, creating a reserved area—a garden of delight

⁵³ For memory, here is Césaire's text from his *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*: "Ah ! mon trésor de salpêtre !/Parce que nous vous haïssons vous/et votre raison nous nous réclavons /de la démente précoce de la folie flamboyante [...]/Et vous savez le reste/Que 2 et 2 font 5 [...]" ("Ah! my saltpeter treasure! / Because we hate you / and your reason we claim kinship / with dementia praecox with flamboyant madness [...] / And you know the rest / That 2 and 2 are 5 [...]").

—where he has no obligation to express a party line” (28). This hypothesis of an apolitical intention would be supported by certain revisions Depestre has made to his early verse: eroticization of some of his early poems⁵⁴ goes hand in hand with the erasure of Marxist verses and seems to become an attempt to dilute party politics. However, the fact that Depestre has, for instance, inscribed clearer gender divisions into his early poems, turning the more neutral term “enfant” into “femme” or “jeune fille,” also dissolves the more egalitarian aspect of his earlier love poetry.

How liberating, then, is the politics of the Depestre’s “solar eroticism”? Is the reader at all confronted with a representation of sexuality beyond constraints that subverts “Western” taboos? Or is it simply a male sexuality that is celebrated at the expense of female subjecthood? In an interview with Dayan, Depestre almost seems to gracefully accept the accusation of sexism, claiming it as a cultural trait and something that has “always been part of human experience” (“France reads Haiti: Interview” 150). He explains that “machismo exists in our culture, in the Caribbean, and it is quite possible that I have not disengaged myself from these trappings” (“France reads Haiti: Interview” 150). As many critics have pointed out, Depestre is by no means the only male Francophone Caribbean author to employ a masculinist vision in his writing. It has been suggested that this type of imagery is perhaps a response to the emasculating psychology of colonialism or a “compensatory fantasy for impotence in other areas” (Dash, *The Other America* 125). Whether it is a

⁵⁴ See especially “La nouvelle création,” “Ressouvenance” (renamed “Ressourcement 1946),” or “Pour l’enfant qui aura toujours seize ans” (renamed “Pour l’éternelle adolescente”).

manifestation of what Albert Memmi called a “valeur refuge” or a way to transcend race through shared heterosexual masculine dominance of the bodies of women, Depestre’s “solar eroticism” remains an unfortunate literary counterpart to the actual situation of many women whose emancipation was lost from view in the celebration of national or international liberation movements (Young 371).

Throughout this chapter, I have offered just a few perspectives on the politics of René Depestre’s poetic works. My engagement with Depestre’s work has its own politics, actively seeking to make visible certain elements and build upon certain potentials opened up in his writing. Other critics have emphasized complementary issues, such as the romantic, prophetic figure for Joan Dayan, and deracialization and colorlessness for Martin Munro (*Rainbow* 12-16; Munro 150, 163). In any case, we can easily see that these texts articulate individual experience in terms of its social, political and historical dimensions. They also draw on and seek to intervene in the sociopolitical discourses that form their context. As we saw with respect to the *Arc-en-ciel*, the poetic subject tackles dominant structures of silencing and “zombification” by symbolically inverting the power relations between oppressors and oppressed. The construction of such a utopian moment for the reader to experience constitutes a “little lamp,” one small voice among many others, but this voice and its recognition matter. And it is not just *what* this voice says that makes a difference; it is also the reflexivity of its poetic speech

that makes the process of political subjectification visible. Many of these poems perform the process of subject construction—as an “I” refusing his given place—and stage the act of political-poetic enunciation. The poem is thus a political thought and act, contributing to the realization of a different “partage du sensible.” Finally, as we saw in the last part of the chapter, the same poetry can hold repressive elements. It relies on a hierarchical gender division, and even a redirected language of exploitation, to make its demands for universal love and liberation. This remains an important problem in Depestre’s work, and one that we cannot pass over in silence.

CHAPTER 4

AGONIQUE

[...] sachez que tout écrit de moi, autre que cette maudite note, qui paraîtrait dans ce cahier, le sera contre mon gré. Si inconsistant que je sois. Malgré mes dénégations et mes revirements. Si agoniquement perpétuelle que soit ma pensée.

—Gaston Miron, “Note d’un homme d’ici”⁵⁵

These lines are taken from “Note d’un homme d’ici,” a little “note” that occupies an important place, opening the prose section “Circonstances” found at the end of the Gaston Miron’s collection of poems and essays, *L’homme rapaillé*.⁵⁶ Miron cautions the reader, claiming that this note is perhaps unique as a sincere written expression of the poet’s will. He also discusses the painful agony weighing upon his thought. Throughout the analyses that follow, we will observe this mental struggle of the poetic subject with himself and with

⁵⁵ “[...] know that, aside from this wretched note, any writing of mine would appear in this notebook against my will. Inconsistent as I may be. Despite my denials and reversals. As agonistically perpetual as my thought may be” (*L’homme rapaillé* 185).

⁵⁶ This is the case at least in the four final editions of the collection overseen by Miron himself. I will not be referring to the “definitive” Gallimard edition here, since its amputated format alters the scope of the work and evidently goes against the way Miron envisioned his collection, as a combination of poetry and prose. Unless otherwise noted, the references and page numbers I provide are for the Typo 1998 edition.

This is a text which has received minimal critical attention despite its important role in framing *L’homme rapaillé*. In his excellent commentary of *L’homme rapaillé*, Pierre Nepveu quotes a large section of “Note d’un homme d’ici” and calls for a reading “comme un *texte*, au même titre que les poèmes, un texte qui dit l’absence intermittente, l’errance et le silence” (*Les mots à l’écoute* 181). However, he himself does not go any further in discussing this text, nor, to my knowledge, do any other critics. “Note d’un homme d’ici” can be read much like Miron’s essay-poems “Aliénation délirante” and “Notes sur le non-poème et le poème,” to which I will turn my attention in the second half of this chapter.

silence, his self-portrayal as mad or ill, as well as the ways in which the subject's body, or rather, his absence from his own body, become central to the text. We will see how the subject internalizes the "circumstances" surrounding him to the point of almost disappearing completely, and how, from this point, on the verge of death, his voice surges out in revolt.

Miron's "Note," like his poems, offers us a politico-medical portrait staging alienation (in its fully multivalent sense), along with its causes and symptoms, and a personal and political battle toward emancipation from this painful state. As I show throughout the chapter, Miron's poetic and discursive reactivation of the notion of alienation owes much to a dialogue with key figures of decolonization, among them Césaire, Depestre, Memmi, Berque, Sartre, and Fanon. Miron speaks of these authors' influence in an interview with Lise Gauvin, clarifying that "j'ai découvert la poésie noire, c'est-à-dire la poésie des Noirs, autour des années 55 avec *Minerai noir* de René Depestre et ensuite les textes d'Aimé Césaire," and that the most important sources for his *Parti pris* articles and writings "proviennent des penseurs de la décolonisation. J'ai lu *Portrait du colonisé* de Memmi en 1957. Cette lecture a été pour moi très éclairante" ("I discovered black poetry, that its poetry written by Blacks, around 1955 with René Depestre's *Minerai noir* and later Aimé Césaire's texts"; "stem from the decolonization thinkers. I read Memmi's *Portrait du colonisé* in 1957. This reading was very enlightening for me"; 65-66). Miron situates himself explicitly as a Francophone postcolonial writer contributing to the tradition established by these works. Throughout this

chapter, I therefore draw parallels between his poetic self-portrait and Memmi and Fanon's seminal socio-psychological portraits. This contribution to a transracial, intertextual community is a key political dimension of *L'homme rapaillé*. It invests the work's revolt with a much broader scope, extending far beyond the borders of Québec.

Sections:

Part I—Portrait of an Illness

4.1.1—“Note d'un homme d'ici”

4.1.2—“L'homme rapaillé”

4.1.3—*Death Poems*

Part II—Poetry's Insurrection

4.2.1—“Aliénation délirante”

4.2.2—“Notes sur le non-poème et le poème”

4.2.3—“Séquences”

Part I: Portrait of an Illness

4.1.1— “Note d’un homme d’ici”

“Note d’un homme d’ici” makes reference to a “cahier” (“notebook”), the first and only volume of *Cahier pour un paysage à inventer*, a Québécois situationist journal that was the initial home of the note. The underlying anti-colonial perspective of the volume is evident in the echo of *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal*. However, maintaining the word in the context of his poetry collection (where “Note d’un homme d’ici” has sometimes appeared without reference to the original publication) means that “cahier” is inevitably (also) read as referring to *L’homme rapaillé* itself. It speaks of Miron’s own conflicted writing practices, torn between the famous temptations of silence, the life-long process of painstaking revision and reshuffling, and the repeated militant poetic interventions.⁵⁷ The word “cahier” holds together something of the intimate journal (“me voici en moi”; “here I am within myself”), the raw and unfinished, the fragmentary (Miron’s collection is punctuated by terms such as “fragments,” “notes,” “extraits”), while simultaneously drawing on the precision and fixity of recorded observations (personal, social, political, linguistic), as in a quasi-scientific study.⁵⁸

A timestamp at the conclusion of the note, “Vendredi, 12 juin 1959/

⁵⁷ For a detailed biographical account of Miron’s life and writing, see Nepveu’s *Gaston Miron: La vie d’un homme*.

⁵⁸ Henri Meschonnic quotes Miron claiming he was “un ethnologue du poème” and “un poète sur le terrain” (“an poetic ethnologist”; “a poet doing fieldwork”; 99). And in an interview with Lise Gauvin, Miron explains his manner of collecting sociolinguistic observations for his poetry: “Quand je suis dans un restaurant, je note continuellement ce que j’entends. Parfois ce sont des alexandrins parfaits que les gens disent. Je note tout. [...] Je donne une forme littéraire à l’oralité” (“When I am in a restaurant, I continuously note what I hear. Sometimes people say perfect alexandrines. I note everything. [...] I give a literary form to orality”; 62).

15h15-15h45,” adds to this effect, while also making the note appear to have been written hastily, and thus, one would believe, more honestly (“Friday, June 12”). Anchored spatially as well, in the abstract nearness of the “here” in the title, the note thus presents the situation of a here-and-now. Along with the inclusion of the term “cahier,” this timestamp frames *L’homme rapaillé* as a tension between two aspects of writing that would appear to be at odds with each other: the infinite time of the poem, always under construction, always eluding the poet, and the finitude of the “honest” note. Of course, we can never know if this note is the product of 30 minutes of writing.⁵⁹ We may have our doubts. What matters is that the timestamp conveys an impression of spontaneous confession and an attempt to overcome a tendency toward self-censorship.

“Note d’un homme d’ici” thus explicitly describes and displays Miron’s writing as a struggle against himself. An agonizingly never-ending process and a perpetually agonistic one. The short clauses following the declaration of writing against his will highlight the need to fix at least a few words with full intentionality, to leave a mark of consistency in a constantly conflictual situation. However impossible it may be, Miron seeks to advance, to put something forward that he cannot erase or withdraw in retrospect. That something emerges as the confession of his struggle with himself, and with

⁵⁹ This seems to have been the “assignment,” since the editor of the journal explains that “la plupart des textes composant ce cahier furent écrits très vite, sinon sur-le-champ” (“most of the texts comprising this notebook were written very quickly, if not on the spot”; 190). The volume was to represent a kind of “enquête,” composed of individual accounts, “l’expression, immédiate, de ce qui est pensé et vécu, en permanence, par chacun” (“the immediate expression of that which is thought and lived, constantly, by everyone”; 190-91).

poetry: “Finissons-en avec le Miron poète qui n’a rien produit et qui ne veut rien produire à l’avenir,” he declares – nevertheless having by this time composed the majority of poems that would appear in *L’homme rapaillé* (“Let us do away with Miron the poet, who has never produced anything and does not want to produce anything in the future,” *L’homme rapaillé* 183).⁶⁰

Within this denial of his poetic self⁶¹ we see the simultaneous splitting of Miron as a subject, illustrating the extent of his internal division. This gesture of distancing from the self is repeated several times, beginning with “cette légende que je suis” (“this legend that I am”) in the first sentence of the text, and continuing with two striking appearances of the designation “l’individu Miron.” The first of these appears in the following explanation:

Et pourquoi cette pratique honnête de l’individu Miron par lui-même, et pourquoi dans le même temps ce détournement de fonds de lui-même par lui-même? Toute ma vie, et jusque dans mes motivations les moins avouables, j’ai essayé que cesse le jeu que je me joue et que je joue, afin que, si homme il y a, celui-ci devienne non plus spectateur et acteur, mais le lieu de la tragédie. Tout cela m’est apparu quand je n’avais encore que sept ans, alors qu’un de mes petits camarades déchira le masque que

⁶⁰ On the chronology of Miron’s writings, see Jean-Cristophe Pleau, p. 147-149.

⁶¹ Throughout his correspondence with Claude Haefley, Miron frequently denies his poetic abilities. He expresses a perpetual self-doubt that keeps him from writing, largely in response to what he views as personal and romantic failures. In an interview with Lise Gauvin, he also mentions a sentiment of guilt with respect to poetic writing, stemming in part from two childhood incidents: being punished in school for writing a poem during class time, and discovering that his grandfather—in his mind a hero—was illiterate. These moments deeply affected Miron and made him more aware of the situation of Québec’s rural and working classes. Consequently, he initially came to view writing poetry as a betrayal of the experiences of common people: “Il n’y avait à mes yeux aucune commune mesure entre la condition de poète, qui me privilégiait pensais-je, et la condition humiliée de tous” (“There was not, as far as I was concerned, any common measure between the condition of the poet, which, I thought, privileged me, and the everyone’s humiliated condition”; *L’homme rapaillé* 194). In addition, the tensions between Anglophones and Francophones he had witnessed while growing up in Sainte-Agathe-des-Monts and the “catastrophe” of his language were at first a source of frustration and political confusion, further inclining him towards silence as a means of opposing the system (*L’homme rapaillé* 219).

je portais à l'occasion d'une mascarade de Mardis gras.
(*L'homme rapaillé* 183)

And why this honest practice by Miron on his own, and why at the same time this misappropriation of funds from himself by himself. All my life, and even for least acceptable of reasons, I have tried to cease playing the role that I play to myself and of myself, so that, if there is a man, he might no longer be the spectator or actor, but the setting of the tragedy. All of this occurred to me when I was only seven years old, when one of my classmates tore the mask I was wearing for a Mardi Gras masquerade party.

A particularly convoluted passage, in which Miron declares his present honesty in terms of self-betrayal, and by once again resorting to the third person. It is as though he cannot bring himself to say "I," to make a simple declaration. Instead we see a struggle, a replay of the childhood scene of the destruction of the mask. He poses himself as an other, as a Rimbaldian spectator of the self or as an imposter whose life is characterized by "cabotinage," "exhibitions dérisoires" and an "énorme caricature" ("histrionics," "pathetic displays," "enormous caricature," *L'homme rapaillé* 183-184). Miron explains that this fraudulent acting is also behind his poetic activity, which, rather than being a source of connection with the self, is described as yet another source of avoidance.

Ce fut aussi mon knock-out poétique. Là aussi l'image (la métaphore) était inventée, vue, et non pas vécue. Dans ces conditions, la poésie devenait, en mon for intérieur, une fuite, une voie d'évitement. (*L'homme rapaillé* 184)

This was also my poetic knock-out. Here also the image (the metaphor) was invented, viewed, and not lived. Under these conditions, poetry became, deep down, an escape, a means of evasion.

This Miron must be unmasked so that life's masquerade might cease

and that Miron might finally coincide with himself and directly live out his experience. As he attempts to rid himself of his interior masks, however, the conflict is doubled and manifested through the writing itself. In spite of Miron's supposed attempt to cease playing a role, to cease fooling himself and his readers, he nevertheless continues to play, and to play with words, both in this text and in the collection as a whole. The crisis of identity coinciding with an apparent break with poetry—one of several in Miron's writings—still cannot let go of the poetic, and perhaps ultimately even depends on poetic language for its expression.

What we can see in the style of all three of the passages I have quoted from the "Note"—the accumulation of staccato clauses, the constant self-interruptions, and the simultaneous extension of the sentences via numerous conjunctions—reveals more than a mania for precision and clarification.⁶² "Note" exposes many of the dominant characteristics of Miron's poetic writings, especially what Pierre Nepveu has identified as a double phenomenon: "le langage comme expression d'un sujet, comme témoignage ou aveu pathétique, et le langage dépassant le sujet, livrant sa voix au libre jeu du rythme et des images" ("language as the expression of a subject, as an account or confession of suffering, and language exceeding the subject, opening his voice to the free play of rhythm and imagery"; *Les mots à l'écoute* 136). Speaking of the poetry, Nepveu goes on to describe a "prolifération anarchique" and a

⁶² On this point see Miron's article, "Le mot juste," *L'homme rapaillé* 239-240.

recherche de la totalité, de la continuité, de l'identité, certes ; mais à travers l'altérité fondamentale des images, dans les heurts et les saccades d'une énonciation sans cesse interrompue et reprise. (*Les mots à l'écoute* 138)

search for totality, continuity, identity, certainly; but through the fundamental otherness of images, in the clashes and jolts of a constantly interrupted and restarted enunciation.

Nepveu argues that Miron's writing is in line with a certain modern poetics that privileges alterity, fragmentation and negativity. Yet for Miron these elements are also sources of suffering. Beyond the theatrical metaphors we just saw, the most important semantic field here, and throughout the collection, is a quasi-medical one, with descriptions of a variety of physical and psychological ailments. Miron describes himself as being "toujours au bord de la misère physiologique et mentale" ("always on the edge of physiological and mental wretchedness"), and most of the note is devoted to the presentation of his symptoms, mainly related to the mind or brain:

- "privé de mes facultés intellectuelles" ("deprived of my intellectual faculties"; 184)
- "une amnésie partielle et intermittente de la pensée" ("a partial and intermittent amnesia of thought"; 184)
- "les trous noirs de mon esprit" ("the black holes of my mind"; 185)
- "des taches solaires sur le cerveau" ("sunspots on the brain"; 185)

Miron resorts to dramatic metaphors in order to describe what seem like frequent difficulties with thought and feelings of limited consciousness. He then generalizes these symptoms to his entire being, revealing that "Je ne

suis pas loin de croire que l'individu Miron est une maladie. (Si un psychanalyste veut m'entreprendre, à ses frais, risques et périls, qu'il communique avec moi.)" ("I'm not far from thinking that Miron is an illness. (If a psychoanalyst wishes to take me on, at his own expense, risk and liability, do contact me.)"; 184).

This second appearance of "l'individu Miron" is more troubling. The "I" of the phrase has become the spokesperson or guardian of Miron, the ward, and these two entities are in conflict. Moreover, the use of the third person takes on an extreme form through an identification with illness: Miron is not just ill, he *is a disorder*. The reader is playfully invited to take the position of a psychoanalyst observing a patient or affliction. This sentence also highlights another major aspect of Miron's writing through the "je ne suis pas loin de croire," a phrase which remains this side of "je crois," in an area of indirect acceptance. It conveys the idea of being on the verge, "agoniquement perpetuelle," rather than on one side or the other. Miron's "Note," like his poems, thus offers us the portrait of a man on the verge of illness and madness, on the verge of being, and on the verge of speech: "Et je ne parle pas de la difficulté, de l'impossibilité, en ces états quasi endémiques, d'accéder au mot, au verbe, à une articulation syntaxique" ("And I'm not even going to speak of the difficulty, the impossibility, in these quasi-endemic states, to access the word, the verb, a syntactic articulation"; 185).

It would seem like the note is an entirely personal account, were it not for the brief caveat at its conclusion. Miron states that "j'aime mieux mourir

avec le plus grand nombre que de me sauver avec une petite élite” (“I prefer to die with the many than to save myself with a small elite”; 185). This sentence adds a collective dimension to everything we have read so far, reminding us that, while speaking of himself, Miron not only views his condition as a singular experience, but also as a societal problem. The illness of which Miron speaks, and which is never named here, is at least in part brought on by social circumstances. Let’s recall that the presentation of the *Cahier pour un paysage à inventer* had described its contents as “des individus prenant conscience du contexte” and its main goal was to “analyser un contexte dont on voit trop bien qu’il faut le modifier si l’on veut vivre une vie qui soit vivable” (“individuals becoming aware of the context”; “analyze a context that one can easily see needs to be modified if one wants to live a livable life”; 190).

One has the sense, then, that the observation “l’individu Miron est une maladie” is only partly a metaphor. We are dealing with what seems like a painful appropriation of “je est un autre,” which would be taken up more directly in the rhetorical question of Paul Chamberland’s *L’afficheur hurle* (1965): “avons-nous besoin de pratiquer ici le long raisonné dérèglement/ de tous les sens ne sommes-nous pas les sombres voyants de/ la vie absente” (“do we need to practice the long reasoned derangement/ of all the senses are we not the dreadful seers of/ absent life”). Miron’s “Note” can be read as an analysis of the self, but also as the reflection of a social context. It is difficult not to be reminded of the line in “Notes sur le non-poème et le poème” (1965) where Miron exclaims, “Je mets en scène l’aliénation, je me mets en scène” (“I

stage alienation, I put on a performance”; 134). In the later essay-poem, the self is again juxtaposed and perhaps identified with the effects of sociopolitical oppression. “Notes sur le non-poème et le poème” names and expands on the same complex ailment that “Note d’un homme d’ici” only begins to evoke.

This is really the essence of *L’homme rapaillé*: a mise-en-scène of the self, and of alienation, of the alienated self. What is alienation for Miron? He comes closest to a definition in “Le mot juste,” the collection’s final essay, where he writes, “Aliénation: traduction de *Entfremdung*, Hegel: dépossession. Ne plus s’appartenir. Devenir étranger à soi-même” (“Alienation: translation Entfremfung, Hegel: dispossession. No longer being oneself”; *L’homme rapaillé* 237). Miron immediately ties this more abstract dispossession to Québec’s unequal socioeconomic and linguistic conditions, before concluding that “La solution est politique. Point” (“The solution is political. Period”; *L’homme rapaillé* 243). Throughout the collection, the term “alienation” thus drifts between disciplines, bearing the traces of psychoanalysis as much as of Hegelian and Marxist thought. As Nepveu points out:

un des faits les plus remarquables de *l’Homme rapaillé* est qu’il dit la coïncidence la plus exacte possible entre le sens politique et le sens psychologique [de l’aliénation]. Par là, le politique est vécu comme maladie et la folie débouche sur l’histoire et le collectif. (*Les mots à l’écoute* 186).

one of the most remarkable facts about *l’Homme rapaillé* is that it voices the most exact coincidence possible between the political sense and the psychological sense [of alienation]. In this way the political is lived as an illness and madness leads to history and the collective.

Miron's portrayal of himself as ill or mad is thus caught up in at least two intertwined political dimensions: on one level, the poems remain a singular expression of an oppressive sociopolitical system and offer an account of the way historical circumstances act on a specific individual, and on another, through the association with the concept of alienation, Miron's condition takes on a collective dimension and becomes a way of thinking the larger political situation.⁶³ Furthermore, by presenting Miron—the person and the poetic persona—as a case, *L'homme rapaillé* incites the reader to explore the relationships between metaphysical, social, linguistic, romantic, economic, psychological and political forms of alienation.

Let's recall that in his *Portrait du colonisé*, Memmi had explained that the victim of colonization “n'arrive presque jamais à coïncider avec lui-même” (“hardly ever comes to coincide with himself”; 154). Memmi denounces the mystification that lies at the root of this estrangement from the self. He explains that in a colonized society, the negative and degrading image that the colonizer constantly presents of the colonized ends up being lived by the latter as an objective reality (107). Similarly, Fanon's “clinical study” examines the way an oppressive political and social system further alienates black subjects through an “intérieurisation” or “épidermisation” of external inequalities (8). In

⁶³ Chamberland gives an additional interpretation, claiming that “la politique du poème se différencie fortement de tout autre discours, de toute autre politique, qui présuppose un sujet relativement indemne, dans la mesure où il est rationnel en sa visée dénonciatrice ou combative” (“the poem's politics differentiates itself from all other discourses, from all other politics, which presuppose a relatively unscathed subject, inasmuch as it is rational in its denunciatory or combative aim”; 38). However, this is problematic, since it assumes that there is a clear division between a (fractured, irrational) poetic subject and a (whole, rational) political one, an opposition which to me seems untenable.

both cases, the hope is that an analysis of this racialized psychological trauma in sociohistorical and linguistic terms will contribute to the unmasking, and ultimately the ruin, of the system that perpetuates it. In Fanon, colonial alienation and neurosis go hand in hand. Of particular relevance to our discussion is Fanon's description of the somatization of the inferiority complex:

Dans le monde blanc, l'homme de couleur rencontre des difficultés dans l'élaboration de son schéma corporel. La connaissance du corps est une activité uniquement négatrice. C'est une connaissance en troisième personne.
[...] J'avais créé au-dessous du schéma corporel un schéma historico-racial. Les éléments que j'avais utilisés ne m'avaient pas été fournis par [les sens], mais par l'autre, le Blanc, qui m'avait tissé de mille détails, anecdotes, récits.
[...] Où me situer? Ou, si vous préférez: où me fourrer? [...] Où me cacher?"(Fanon 89-91).

In the white world the man of color encounters difficulties in the development of his bodily schema. Consciousness of the body is solely a negating activity. It is a third-person consciousness.
[...] Below the corporeal schema I had created a historico-racial schema. The elements I had used had not been provided to me by [the senses], but by the other, the White, who had woven me out of a thousand details, anecdotes, stories.
[...] Where am I to situate myself? Or, if you prefer: where should I shove myself? [...] Where am I to hide?

Throughout the analyses that follow, we will observe the ways in which the poetic subject's body, or rather, his absence from his own body and his observation of himself from the outside, become central to the text.

4.1.2—“*L’homme rapaillé*”

We began at the end of the collection with “Circonstances” and Miron’s “Note.” Now let us return to its opening and look at some of the other elements framing *L’homme rapaillé*. The “liminal” poem functions as a kind of foreword, signaling both a movement of beginning and of closure, while nevertheless remaining hauntingly open-ended.

*j’ai fait de plus loin que moi un voyage abracadabrant
il y a longtemps que je ne m’étais pas revu
me voici en moi comme un homme dans une maison
qui s’est faite en son absence
je te salue silence*

*je ne suis pas revenu pour revenir
je suis arrivé à ce qui commence*

*from beyond myself I have been on an abracadabrous voyage
it had been a long time since I had seen myself
here I am within myself like a man in a house
that was made in his absence
I greet you, silence.*

*I did not come back to return
I have arrived at what is beginning*

In the distance it creates between the “I” and the “me,” the first line expresses a splitting of the lyric subject similar to what we saw in the “Note.” The next lines reinforce this effect of estrangement through a powerful accumulation: “je ne m’étais pas revu,” “me voici en moi,” “comme un homme,” “en son absence.” After the title, these lines offer us an initial glimpse of the fragmented being that will form a kind of central character in the

collection.⁶⁴ Despite the suggestion of a finished action through the *passé composé* (“j’ai fait [...] un voyage”) and the relative proximity of the subject to himself as he exclaims “me voici en moi,” this is no simple return home after a completed voyage. The subject has returned to himself only to be immediately dispersed again through the very enunciation of his coincidence—the “en moi” essentially betrays the “me voici”—and through the anonymizing and generalizing force of “homme.” The passage to the third person recalls Fanon’s description of black subjectivity and the feeling of being outside oneself, of viewing one’s own body as “une connaissance en troisième personne” (“a consciousness in the third person”; 89). The simile “comme un homme dans une maison” accentuates the fact that the subject is still not at home *chez soi*. He still does not inhabit himself, still *is not* himself.

And perhaps, he also does not inhabit his language. In his annotated 1994 edition of the collection, Miron provides some important context for this poem.

Automne 1969. En rentrant chez moi, au milieu de la nuit, au retour d’une manifestation à Québec contre la loi linguistique 63, j’ai transcrit tel quel ce poème, le titre en moins, qu’une voix au fond de moi m’avait dicté durant le trajet. (*L’homme rapaillé* 1994, 15)

Fall 1969. Back home, in the middle of the night, returning from a rally in Quebec against Bill 63 [a language law], I transcribed this poem as is, except for the title, which a voice within me had dictated during the itinerary.

Bill 63, the “Loi pour promouvoir la langue française au Québec,” in fact

⁶⁴ Numerous other poems take up the kind of out of body experience evoked here through memorable lines such as “à part moi je me parle” (“Marche à l’amour”) or “déphasé et décentré dans ma coïncidence” (“Monologues de l’aliénation délirante”).

sanctioned the option of an English-language education for children of immigrants. Jean-Christophe Pleau reminds us that 1969 was the first time the linguistic question was posed abstractly to the Québécois people (that is without the pretext of a specific incident such as a strike), in an attempt by the government to settle the problem. Miron was an important figure in the 15,000-person protest against this law, having been appointed director of the “Syndicat des écrivains.” Pleau views Miron’s note regarding the protest as a significant element in understanding the poem “L’homme rapaillé” more fully:

L’aventure du voyage à Québec pour la manifestation devant le Parlement nous suggère tout de suite une interprétation anecdotique du “voyage abracadabrant” du premier vers [...] qui autrement n’eût pris de sens pour nous qu’à des niveaux plus abstraits. (106)

The adventure of the trip to Québec for the rally in front of the Parliament immediately suggests an anecdotal interpretation of the “abracadabrous voyage” of the first line [...] which would otherwise have only acquired meaning for us on more abstract levels.

Without reducing the poem to this dimension, Pleau makes the significant argument that Miron’s contextualization reminds the reader that the collection was written in a specific historical situation. One cannot simply do away with political interpretations simply because they may no longer be fashionable. Miron begins his collection, then, with what is on one level an evocation of his return from a protest on language politics and ends it with the final words of “Le mot juste” that I mentioned earlier: “La solution est politique. Point.”

The “voyage abracadabrant” could certainly refer to a political journey,

and not just in the biographical sense that Pleau recalls. It is perfectly possible to read “de plus loin que moi” as the evocation of a collective dimension beyond the self, the house as a metaphor for society, and so on. The voyage could also be a hitherto unintelligible voyage through life, the feeling of passing through without being able to make sense of things, and arriving at a *prise de conscience*, political or not. The subject could be arriving at a new beginning in recognition of his alienation, for instance. Miron’s essay “Un long chemin” (1965), which explains his confrontation with the term “colonized,” would certainly lend support to such a reading.

Through its placement as an introductory note preceding the collected poems, “L’homme rapaillé” also opens onto numerous other possibilities. The voyage can be interpreted as the writing and piecing together of the collection itself. It could simply be, then, that this “grand voyage qui contient tous les voyages” refers to a *poetic* voyage which has either come to an end or is only just beginning (“great voyage containing every voyage”). As with the protest anecdote, Miron’s annotation, while making an explicit mention of poetry, hardly directs us further.

J’ai eu le sentiment vif que ce poème coïncidait avec la venue de ma fille, née quelques mois auparavant, et avec la fin de quelque chose [...] il caractérisait et signifiait la fin d’une démarche de poésie-vie et le commencement d’une autre. (*L’homme rapaillé* 1994, 15).

I had the intense feeling that this poem coincided with the arrival of my daughter, born a few months earlier, and with the end of something [...] it characterized and signified the end of one kind of poem-life and the beginning of another.

With the birth of his daughter, then, we also have the beginning of

another type of life, or another type of poetry—the rebirth of a man or a poet—it remains unclear. The final line of the first stanza plays into this same problem: is the subject turning away from silence or towards it? Again in light of Rimbaud,⁶⁵ “je te salue, silence” has been interpreted as an adieu to poetry, a welcoming of silence, a kind of last word before the end of a “poésie-vie.” Was poetry a kind of protective flight or form of avoidance (as Miron suggests in the “Note d’un homme d’ici”)? If so, in reading *L’homme rapaillé*, we are perhaps looking at a journal or notebook of a return from poetry, from playing the role of the poet.

But if the “voyage abracadabrant” indeed reflects a poetic voyage, it is perhaps also a magical one: could Miron be suggesting that poetry is an exemplary kind of performative utterance, making something appear out of nowhere, transcending the real and transporting one in an instant? After all, in his “Notes sur le non-poème et le poème,” Miron claims that “le poème est genèse de présence [...] le poème refait l’homme” (“the poem generates presence [...] the poem puts man back together”). This is also one of the possible meanings of the title of the liminal poem, and of the collection. One can then read “je te salue, silence” as a nod or a bow to silence, not in submission, but rather in acknowledgement of an initial inclination that is hereby abandoned in order to *speak*. This is, ultimately, one of the overarching themes of the work: speaking out when the circumstances would prefer and

⁶⁵ Together with the distancing from the self that occurs in the first four lines, the reader might also trace *abracadabrant* to the heritage of Rimbaud, whose poem “Le Coeur supplicié” calls out “Ô flots abracadabrantésques/ Prenez mon cœur, qu’il soit sauvé” (“Oh abracadabrantésque waves/ Take my heart, let it be saved!”).

promote silence.

Against absence, and the silence that borders it, “contre tout ce qui me rend absent et douloureux,” Miron affirms that the poem generates presence and “refait l’homme” (“against everything that renders me absent and painful”). This idea merits some more discussion in light of the poem’s and collection’s title: *l’homme rapaillé*. *Rapailler* is a Québécois word meaning to gather what has been scattered. The adjective form in the title implies that the gathering or collecting has already taken place, and that we are looking at a man pieced (back) together. However, what the reader actually sees, in the liminal poem as well as the collection as a whole, is a series of portraits of a subject that remains painfully dispersed, both physically and psychologically, despite constant, renewed efforts at reunification.

The project of *L’homme rapaillé* recalls Fanon’s first-person description of the black subject’s confrontation with a racist system that not only “fixes” him from the outside, but also acts as a disintegrating force: “Mon corps me revenait étalé, disjoint, rétamé, tout endeuillé dans ce jour blanc d’hiver” (“My body was returned to me sprawled out, broken apart, recolored, plunged into mourning in that white winter day”; 91). Against this process of racialization, the subject constantly struggles to pull himself back together and exclaims “voici les menus morceaux par un autre moi réunis” (“here are the bits and pieces reunited by another me”; 88). Similarly, the other selves of Miron’s poems present the reader with an effort to bring together disparate images of a subject mourning his ailing body, speaking of and through his divided-up

being, “éparpillé dans mes gestes et brouillé dans mon être,” (“scattered in my movements and clouded in my being”; “Après et plus tard”) and tying his experience to a fractured and disoriented community:

Et c’est ainsi depuis des générations que je me désintègre
 (“Notes sur le non-poème et le poème”)

And thus for generations I have been disintegrating

ce peuple au regard épaillé sur ce qu’il voit (“Le camarade ”)

this people with a scattered gaze on what it sees

Since the “I” spans several generations it now represents an entity that transcends the self. Miron most likely treats “épaillé” as an antonym to “rapaillé” here, more or less equivalent with broken or scattered. He uses the same term in an interview with Jean Turcotte, again linking his individual state to a collective condition:

Je suis un poète en morceaux, un poète épaillé, dans ma vie individuelle et dans ma vie sociale. Dans ce sens-là, je suis à l’image de la collectivité qui a été atomisée, fragmentée. À l’image de l’homme séparé de lui-même. Mais nous sommes en train de nous rapailler, de refaire l’unité de l’homme québécois, en lui et dans sa structure globale. (Gervais 80)

I am a poet in pieces, a scattered poet, in my individual life and in my social life. In that sense, I am in the image of the collectivity, which has been atomized, fragmented. In the image of man separated from himself. But we are in the process of reassembling ourselves, of rebuilding the unity of the Québécois, within himself and in his global structure.

This statement shows how, for Miron, even though the “I” remains irreducible to the collective in his singular experience, the notion of the self is nevertheless profoundly embedded in the social fabric. “I” and “we” flow into

each other and can in some ways be thought together, just as “l’homme Québécois” or “le Québécois” also relate to Man in the largest sense.

L’homme rapaillé is the portrait of a condition, a man, a society, then, but it is also an oeuvre. *Rapaillé* refers as much to problems of identity, community and language as it does to Miron’s textual practice, one of gathering together his isolated publications of poems and prose according to a “disposition en mosaïque,” piecing together fragments to form new poems, and constantly re-ordering, revising and even annotating his work (*L’homme rapaillé* 1994, 226). *Courtepointes*, the title of a subsection of *L’homme rapaillé*, similarly reflects the idea of reassembling disparate pieces. Moreover, just as Miron describes himself above as an image of society, his text is an image of the anguished “Miron,” with its “vers boiteux” and “vers en souffrance,” his designations for the several verses in his 1994 edition that he was still unhappy with even after numerous modifications (“gimpy lines”; “suffering lines”). Miron again slips into a parallel structure to announce that in revising his work, “je désaliène mes poèmes et je me désaliène en même temps qu’eux” (“I disalienate my poems and myself along with them”; 1994, 226). The “homme rapaillé” is also the biographical voice of the poet here, whose disalienation is in fact dependent on arriving at a purged and precise verse. In *L’homme rapaillé*, textual fragmentation, incompleteness and disorder are therefore not simply valorized in themselves, as modern aesthetic principles. Rather, they represent a politicized mode of writing which is significant as the presentation of a symptom of alienation. François Dumont

points to this interpretation when he writes that, “si la dispersion est assumée, c'est à titre de désordre provisoire. Miron adapte les perspectives politiques de Jacques Berque et d'Albert Memmi à la construction du livre: il faudrait montrer et assumer le désordre de l'aliénation pour arriver à en sortir” (“if dispersion is accepted, it is as a provisional disorder. Miron adapts the political perspectives of Jacques Berque and Albert Memmi to the book's construction: it is necessary to show and accept the disorder of alienation so as to be able to come out of it”; 88). And yet, in poetic language, a certain kind of disorder or dispersion is never temporary, but rather constitutive. Nepveu highlights a paradox of Miron's approach, since poetic language itself creates its own form of alienation:

L'Homme rapaillé peut se lire comme une immense quête de la continuité ou de l'homogénéité, contre la séparation, la fissure, la disjonction. À cela correspond non seulement un réseau d'images, mais une syntaxe et un rythme. À ce niveau, les tensions sont inévitables, car le langage, et à plus forte raison le langage poétique, ne cherche le continu que dans le discontinu. (*Les mots à l'écoute* 119).

L'Homme rapaillé can be read as a broad quest for continuity or homogeneity, against separation, fracturing, dislocation. To this corresponds not only a network of images, but a syntax and a rhythm. At this level, tensions are inevitable, since language, and all the more so poetic language, seeks the continuous only in the discontinuous.

As the poet undertakes his “rapaillage,” the gesture of piecing together occurs through the same poetic language that displays the alienated condition. Speaking dispersal is supposed to simultaneously be speaking reunification, yet both take place in a linguistic form that functions at the limits of meaning. The reason *L'homme rapaillé* is so powerful as a manifestation of alienation,

individual and societal, is precisely because its unruly, overflowing language and structure stage and intensify the scattering that the subject struggles to resist. Miron's claim that "je me désaliène en même temps" suggests that at the height of this expression, the verse speaks (against) alienation, restoring some agency to a biographical subject that resists passivity. Miron's repeated denials of poetry may be linked to this tension. Poetic language may defy the unity or coherence Miron claims to be searching for, but it is perhaps the most apt form of expression for the separation from the self and feelings of silencing that peck away at the subject.

Finally, we should note that the initial title of the liminal poem was "L'homme ressoudé," and Miron explains that he oscillated between several adjectives, among them *rapiecé*, *rassemblé*, and *reformé* (15). *Rapailler* is more rare, and specific to Québec; it is also more colloquial than these other terms, and therefore more in line with Miron's oral aesthetic throughout the collection. Most importantly, its specific rural origin (to re-stuff with straw) allows Miron to play with the image of a scarecrow, a lifeless, patched-together shell of something resembling a human being. The scarecrow's speech is only that of the crows it is meant to repel, whose hoarse cries, like the scarecrow's body, are the opposite of beautiful. "L'homme rapaillé" is thus also the "homme croa-croa" ("Séquences"), "à la bouche/les mots corbeaux de poèmes qui croassent" ("speaking with/ cawing raven words"; "La braise et l'humus"), his speech on the verge of disarticulation. In his "Tombeau de Miron" (1983), the poet explicitly makes this connection, writing "je suis l'épouvantail picoré,"

additionally evoking the image of Prometheus (“I am the pecked scarecrow”).

4.1.3—Death Poems

Our poet-*voleur-de-feu* frequently complains of aches and pains, wounds, physical deterioration, vision problems, amnesia, weariness and despair, but by far the most frequent theme of the collection is the feeling of being at the edge of life or on the verge of death. As the most extreme manifestation of suffering in the collection, the poems that explicitly mention this liminal state are central to our understanding of the somatization of alienation. In dialogue with “L’homme rapaillé,” the *Courtepointes* poem entitled “Rue Saint-Christophe” offers the reader an intimate glimpse of the feeling of being between life and death, which begins with the reification of the subject.

“Rue Saint-Christophe”

Je vis dans une très vieille maison où je commence
à ressembler aux meubles, à la très vieille peau des fauteuils
peu à peu j'ai perdu toute trace de moi sur place
le temps me tourne et retourne dans ses bancs de brume
tête davantage pluvieuse, ma très-très tête au loin

(Étais-je ces crépitements
d'yeux en décomposition
étais-je ce gong du cœur
dans l'errance de l'avenir
ou était-je ma mort invisible pêchant à la ligne
dans l'horizon visible...

cependant qu'il m'arrive encore des fois
de plus en plus brèves et distantes
de surgir sur le seuil de mon visage
entre chaleur et froid)

“Saint Christopher Street”

I live in a very old house where I am beginning
to resemble the furniture, the very old skin of the armchairs

little by little I have lost all trace of myself in this place
time turns and returns me in its banks of fog
my ever more rainy head, my very-very head in the distance

(Was I these sputterings
of decomposing eyes
was I this gong of the heart
in the wandering of the future
or was this my invisible death casting a line
in the visible horizon...

meanwhile there are still times
more and more brief and distant
when I emerge on the threshold of my face
between heat and cold)

We know that the biographical Miron did in fact live on this little Montréal street, but the poem undoes the ties to a specific place or identifiable situation. This is even its theme, in a way: the dissociation of the self from the self and from any concrete surroundings. The poem begins with “je vis,” yet this poetic subject’s initial affirmation of living is immediately circumscribed. He is enclosed by “une très vieille maison” where he has begun to metamorphose into the “très vieille peau des fauteuils,” and then gradually disappear into non-being. Once again, the image of the house is not one of stability or familiarity, but rather a reminder of one’s absence or inability to inhabit a space, including one’s own body. The house becomes an almost haunted place, absorbing the increasingly fantomatic being of the speaker. There could be a parallel here with Fanon’s description of the experience of the black subject reduced to his skin by a white gaze: “et voici que je me découvrais objet au milieu d’autres objets. Enfermé dans cette objectivité écrasante” (“and now I discovered myself to be an object among other objects. Confined in this

crushing reification”; Fanon 88; 91). “Rue Saint-Christophe” itself does not present any external causes for the speaking subject’s erasure, and limits itself to expressing the process of deterioration. The subject has become an object at the mercy of time, like a fish being dragged by death and struggling at the end of a line.

However, as the speaker withers into the absolute absence of an invisible death, having lost sight of every trace of himself, there nevertheless remain some traces of his being and of his poetic agency. The “gong du coeur,” for instance, indicates a void, perhaps a loss of hope for the future, and yet that very emptiness also allows a presence to resonate. The anaphora and assonance of the second stanza become a signal in the fog, waiting to be acknowledged. Still an object, lost and disoriented in a haze, the speaker does occasionally arrive on the shore of expression, intermittently returned to his body, bringing some life and some vision to his “visage.” With the verb “surgir,” one might expect to witness an action or clear gesture; yet the poem maintains a state of ambivalence through “surgir au seuil de mon visage” and “entre chaleur et froid”. The “visage” itself is a kind of threshold, part of the “tête au loin,” the part that brings together and separates the external world and the mind. The face is also the part of the head that sees and recognizes while in turn being that which is recognizable and recognized by others. Finally, just like the poem evokes the threshold between subjecthood and objecthood, the two stanzas in parentheses seem to be on the threshold of the poem itself. They are not quite present in the same way as the first, and rather

suggest something like an aside or a postscript. Since they are in the past tense, show a considerable change in rhythm and structure, and use the ambiguous demonstrative “ce,” which can plausibly refer to the portrait sketched in the first stanza, it may be that they represent a kind of commentary in retrospect. The first line of this second section, “Étais-je ces crépitements/ d'yeux en décomposition,” perhaps returns us to that first stanza, making us remark the intense alliteration of stop consonants (b, d, p, t).

Je vis **d**ans une **t**rès vieille maison où je commence
à ressem**b**ler aux meub**l**es, à la **t**rès vieille **p**eau **d**es fauteuils
peu à **p**eu j'ai **p**erdu toute **t**race **d**e moi sur **p**lace
le **t**emps me **t**ourne et retourne **d**ans ses **b**ancs **d**e **b**rumes
tête **d**avantage **p**luvieuse, ma **t**rès-très **t**ête au loin

We can re-read these sounds as the dry, crackling bursts reproducing the decomposition of the self that accompanies the speaker's fogged vision. “Rue Saint Christophe” thus depicts a worn out and lost subject, who feels that his consciousness is dissipating while his biological being persists. This poem is another “volet” of the subject we saw returning to himself after a long absence in “L'homme rapaillé” and the one of “Note d'un homme d'ici” who had confessed “je titubais sur mes néants” (“I staggered across my voids”; 185).⁶⁶

The decay we see in “Rue Saint-Christophe” becomes even more dramatic in “Fait divers”, where it also begins to take on a social dimension.

⁶⁶ Again we are reminded of Fanon's text, in which the subject finds himself “à cheval entre le Néant et l'Infini, je me mis à pleurer” (“straddling Nothingness and the Infinite, I began to weep”; Fanon, 114). In “Ce monde sans issue” Miron arrives at this same gesture of despair, “Pleure un peu, pleure ta tête, ta tête de vie/ [...] ta tête de mort” (“Weep a bit, weep your head, your life's head/ [...] your death's head”).

[...]
il n'avait que sa folie
vous lui avez tire dessus

il s'est mis à s'tasser
il s'est mis à s'manger
on n'a jamais vu ça
un homme qui se mange
un homme qui s'insère
dans la fêlure de sa vie

hors du vivant, vivant
un homme que le monde enferme
[...]

he had only his madness
you shot at him

he began to shrink
he began to eat away at himself
no one's ever seen such a thing
a man eating himself
a man sliding himself
into the cracks of his life

outside of the living, living
a man that the world locks up

The "il" in "Fait divers" is another manifestation of liminal being. Enclosed this time in his own madness, the subject is separated by and from the world. The title condenses the essence of the situation, announcing a minor sensational event, noteworthy yet at the same time of a certain irrelevance, of local and ephemeral interest. The death of this man is by no means a historical event, we are told.⁶⁷ The implicit set-up of the poem is that of a hostile or sadistic crowd observing a freak spectacle, apparently a madman eating himself. The public scene of autophagia concretizes a preceding state of

⁶⁷ We are reminded of Memmi's portrayal of the colonized, who, like the "il" of Miron's poem, is never a subject of History and is always "hors jeu" (Memmi 111).

mental and social alienation. It makes visible something that had been occurring all along, something that one saw without seeing until it became a shocking display. While the initial poetic voice blames an ambiguous “vous,” suggesting the death can almost be seen as a collective murder, the poem concludes with what seems like a very different voice. The intervention of an authority calls on passers-by to move on: “dispersez-vous/ rentrez chez vous” – there is nothing more to be seen here (“break it up/ go home”). This is crucial for interpreting the poem, since this voice of authority, like the title, seeks to minimize the importance of the scene, to hide any trace of dehumanization or injustice that the poetic voice had hinted at. “Fait divers” thus demonstrates how a scene of collective responsibility has been turned into a scene of singular madness, and how the “vous,” coinciding with the reader, is ordered to be passive.

The “il” of “Fait divers” resembles numerous other manifestations of the “homme rapaillé,” in particular with respect to being somewhere in between life and death. In a later poem, “Tombeau de Miron (*au vif*)” (1983), the poet commemorates his own death, concluding with “faites halte, passants: c’était Miron, puis passez” (“passersby, stop: that was Miron, then move on”). Even more than the final lines of “Fait divers,” this verse insists on the passivity of the public before a spectacle of suffering and decay that it views as individual – “c’était Miron.”

So far, I have been dwelling mostly on the singular dimension of somatization in Miron’s poetry. That this portrait of an individual suffering is

also the reflection of a wider, oppressive sociopolitical context or that its poetic manifestation might represent a form of resistance to the effects of such a system - these ideas have only been visible around the edges of my discussion. If I have delayed speaking about Miron's more explicit linking of individual and collective suffering, it is because I wanted to make clear that they are not equivalent (as many critics treat them). The "I" and the "we" do not fuse without remainder. Nevertheless, a significant portion of the poetry and prose of *L'homme rapaillé* is devoted to reflection on a societal level that the speaking subject is well aware he is a part of. The poem "Demain, l'histoire" expresses the relationship between the death poems we have looked at so far, and the decaying society they partly reflect.

Triste pareil à moi, il ne s'en fait plus
je regarde ce peuple qui va bientôt mourir [...]
personne ici ne meurt de sa belle mort
c'est un peu de nous tous en celui qui s'en va

Sad just like me, it no longer worries
I watch this people that will soon die [...]
no one here dies of a natural death
it's a bit of us all in each one that passes away

Amidst the proliferation of death—an unnatural death, a provoked or cultivated death—Miron is not a mere distant observer. Rather, in an overt display of nationalism, he identifies with the people, who are described as "pareil à moi." Every one of the "nous tous" becomes part of an organic whole through a kind of communion in death. Yet the explicit link between the "I" and the fate of the collectivity also goes beyond simple nationalism. We can see this more clearly in "Les années de déréluction," where Miron writes:

puisque **je** suis perdu, comme **beaucoup des miens**
que **je** ne peux parler autrement qu'entre **nous**
ma langue pareille à **nos** désarrois et **nos** détresses
et bientôt pareille à la fosse commune de **tous**

since I am lost, like many of my folks
since I can only talk between ourselves
my tongue like our confusions and our distresses
and soon like the mass grave of us all

In this stanza, while speaking of himself, the "I" again implicates himself in the experience of other individuals who, like him, are trapped in a system promoting linguistic dispossession and political and economic powerlessness. The "I" is enclosed within the reality of a language that can no longer be spoken "autrement qu'entre nous." For Miron, the sociopolitical situation has transformed French in Québec into a devalorized language that is "pour usage domestique seulement" ("for household/servant use only"; *L'homme rapaillé* 210). It is "domestique" as both the servile language spoken by a dominated class, and as a "valeur refuge," as Memmi would call it, whose quotidian utility extends no farther than the home (Memmi 117). Just as for Memmi, language in *L'homme rapaillé* plays a central role in political and socioeconomic divisions.

The series of similes compare the subject to "beaucoup des miens" then to a vague "us," and finally to an equally unidentifiable "tous." With each new line, the group with which "I" is linked is broadened. While these pronouns are implicitly rooted in the Québécois context, then, there is a simultaneous form of "depaysement" or "uprooting" that stems from the fact that historical references or place names are consistently obscured, as Pierre Nepveu has also

remarked in his discussion of the collection. This means that Miron's portrayal of the self or of the national community also offers an opening onto other contexts. In a sense, "I" also speaks in the name of an absolute "tous," "all" those who in one sense or another are menaced by the "mass grave." The national is exceeded in another way as well. While there are several appearances of "us," "we" or "our," the recurring figure that structures this poem is the simile, and it opens nearly every stanza: "comme moi, comme plusieurs," "comme la plupart autour," "comme un grand nombre," etc. This structure once again preserves the singular experience of the "I" while writing the subject's awareness of the collective context of his situation and his effort to create a resistant community.

A crucial point here is that once the collective dimension of the subject's affliction becomes visible, there is no possibility for turning back in denial. Language, in particular, constitutes an unavoidable link between the self and the collective. "Ce monde sans issue" expresses this situation in its second stanza:

et ne pouvant plus me réfugier en Solitude [...]
que je meure ici au cœur de la cible
au cœur des hommes et des horaires
car il n'y a plus un seul endroit
de la chair de solitude qui ne soit meurtri
même les mots que j'invente
ont leur petite aigrette de chair bleuie

and no longer able to take refuge in Solitude [...]
may I die here at the heart of the target
at the heart of men and timetables
because there is no longer a single spot
of the flesh of solitude that has not been bruised
even the words that I invent

have their little crest of blue flesh

Solitude as an absolutely individualist stance is not an option because the subject has become aware that part of his alienation stems from social and historical conditions that similarly affect others. He is unavoidably implicated in a collective struggle that extends beyond him. Similarly, a poetry constituting a form of flight from the present circumstances (“ainsi/qu’un départ d’oiseau dans la savane”) cannot be authentic, since the language linking the poet to his readers is itself affected by the sociopolitical situation. The impossibility of escape is also reflected in this stanza through repetitive vocabulary and sounds. We can notice that “solitude,” “coeur,” and “chair” all appear twice, as though the poet is demonstrating the difficulty of invention when one is caught “au coeur des hommes et des horaires.” The striking frequency of echoes and rhymes in the stanza (ici/cible; meure/meurtri; hommes/horaires; endroit/soit; petite/aigrette; meurtri/bleuie) reinforce the numbing circularity Miron so frequently complains about. The words that the poetic subject invents, with their repetitions and echoes that might otherwise decorate the text, here reflect and demonstrate the conflict between alienation and aesthetic production. There is no exit except through the staging of the conflict and the manifestation of a resistance.

Nowhere in the collection is the attack on language more powerfully displayed than in “De contre.” This poem is one of the few to have been left

largely untouched by critics.⁶⁸ This is perhaps because it is seemingly “le moins mironien de Miron” (“the least Miron-like of Miron’s poems”). It nonetheless remains one of the most intense examples in his work of the performative insertion of madness, suffering, and decay into the very form of the text. Even within *Courtepointes*, which is more experimental in form than the earlier collections, “De contre” immediately stands out through its extremely short lines running down the entire page. The title is by far the most cryptic in *L’homme rapaillé*, juxtaposing two prepositions without any “meaningful” words. Yet the phrase “de contre” nevertheless suggests some meaning, while simultaneously

demonstrating the alienated poet’s difficulty with bringing speech into being. Miron could be forging an expression here, one that suggests the state of being

“De contre”

Le mal de
le mal de tête
de long
de court
de travers et à l’envers
de toutes sortes de
mais surtout de
dès ma sortie
de
ma tête de tête
en quelles verdure en quelles neiges
où était ma tête
en ces jours de
ma tête de moi
ma tête à qui ma tête à quoi
ma tête à nous peut-être

toujours est-il que de
dans l’horizontale haleine
avec ma tête effalée
ma tête affalée
le temps de
m’entête
et l’affaire de
dont c’est la fin des temps de
ce mal de
ce mal de tête
tête à ci tête à ça
de ci de ça
comme de
le dernier forçat de forçat

à force de
tête
de contre

⁶⁸ Pierre Ouellet is, to my knowledge, the only critic to mention these lines or to pay attention to Miron’s poetics of the “tête,” a word that returns obsessively in the later poems.

against or in opposition to something. *De* could also mark a position of speech or point of view, which would give something like “from against.” We could even invent an etymology for Miron’s phrase, which might stem from the Latin *de contra* and *decontra*, meaning “facing,” “face to face,” “opposite” or “from a position opposite.” The poem is riddled with similar isolated idiomatic phrases, but perhaps no accepted forms really suffice to describe the sentiment of permanent opposition, confrontation, or defiance enclosing “l’homme rapaillé.” We see a confrontation without any clear adversary, one that is experienced mainly as a vague

situation or circumstance. The disorientation that the reader feels when reading the title could also be due to an ellipsis. The entire poem is constructed around such omissions, leaving few verses whose meanings are not at the very least ambivalent. As a title, “De contre” might simply present the contents of

“Of Against”

The ache of
headache
of long
of short
of crooked and inverted
of all sorts of
but especially of
since my coming out of
from
my head of head
in which pastures in which snows
where was my head
in those days of
my head of mine
my head of whom my head of what
my head of ours perhaps

the fact remains that
in the horizontal huff
with my clouched head
then my slouched head
the time of
makes me headstrong
and the matter of
which is the end of times of
this ache of
this headache
head to this head to that
of this of that
as of
the last convict of convict

by dint of
head
of against

the poem: “Of Being Against,” one might read. The “contre” might also reflect what is left of an expression that the entire poem seems to conjure: “se taper la tête contre les murs” (“to bang one’s head against the wall”). The poem not only presents the portrait of a subject who is stuck in a difficult situation, but also mimes this useless, repetitive gesture of frustration bordering on madness. Pierre Ouellet’s comments hint at this point, as well, when he writes that, “on écrit la tête contre les murs, comme la bête de somme donnant du front contre le vent, contre le temps, la tête la première pour prendre élan” but remarks that with Miron we always seem to be looking at an “élan raté” (“one writes head against the wall, like the beast of burden beating its head against the wind, against time, to gain momentum,” “failed thrust,” 55, 52). The text actually brings the reader to the brink of linguistic breakdown, just this-side of non-sense, where meaning can barely surface from the aborted (or obstructed) attempts at speech. The unclear *enjambements* make most lines oscillate between multiple possible meanings while also remaining on the threshold of meaninglessness.

The first line is abruptly amputated: “Le mal de”— a pain that is not fully expressible at first, a pain that remains unnamable, generalized and conceptualized— a headache, we are told in the next line, the word “head” appearing no less than fourteen times as the poem unfolds. There is no subject here, only a disembodied head losing its mind.⁶⁹ This may explain the striking

⁶⁹ Ouellet correctly notices the importance of the head in Miron’s work, explaining that it is the “lieu où se construit et se déconstruit l’identité” (“place of the construction and deconstruction of identity,” 53). We see a similar poetics of the head in “Ce monde sans issue,” where Miron writes “Pleure un peu, pleure ta tête, ta tête de vie/ dans le feu des épées de vent dans tes

absence of any “I” (extremely rare in Miron), as well as the oscillation in the middle of the poem between personhood and objecthood (qui/quoi), between singular and plural (moi/nous⁷⁰) (53). The head is also “l’organe de la passion poétique, le membre supérieur de l’*émotion esthétique*” (“the organ of poetic passion, the upper extremity of *aesthetic emotion*,” 54). Here, poetic creation, and thought of any kind, is apparently impeded, moved into stuttering, breathlessness, or self-censorship as the subject’s troubles become localized in the head.

“M’entête” perhaps holds a double meaning. At first related to the exhaustion that plagues the subject, the ambiguous “the time of” gives him a headache; but “the time of” also causes him to become more obstinate in the face of that exhaustion. Once again we see the double movement in which the source of agony becomes the source of an agonistic struggle *against*. The second stanza ends with a subject that is at the end of his forces, but perhaps also a subject beginning to grasp at the larger context of his condition. The word “forçat” evokes a situation of forced or excessive labor, or in any case a suspension of freedom by force. Miron may also be making an oblique reference to the “forçats de la faim.” The expression of causality in the closing section can be read in relation to this reference, however because of the ellipsis

cheveux/ parmi les éclats sourds de béton sur tes parois” (“Weep a bit, weep your head, your life’s head/ in the fire the wind’s swords in your hair/ amid the deaf concrete bangs on your walls”).

⁷⁰ Who is “nous”? One cannot rule out an internal estrangement or multiplication of the subject, where “nous” does not refer to any exterior entity. After all, Miron is his own “hors de moi et mon envers” (“I am my own outside and my inverse”). But it is equally plausible that “ma tête a nous peut-être” refers to a feeling of being pulled outside the self by a collective situation.

the causality seems reversible. One finds oneself in this state because of one's social condition as "le dernier forçat de forçat," but one also becomes and remains "le dernier forçat de forçat" through the blockage, linguistic and political, through the repetitive, incomplete and desperate movements that cannot lead to an exit. Despite the absence of any explicit claims or any identifiably political message, one can certainly read this poem as a manifestation of the individual interiorization (of a subject and of poetic form itself) of a societal problem that has not yet been recognized or cannot be articulated as such. It is difficult to speak of a structure here, yet we can at least remark the shift in the dominant pronouns from the first stanza to the second, from a "my" to a "this," which is no longer necessarily personal. "Ce mal de" is suggestive of many things in the context of the collection (such as physical or psychological pain, collective suffering). However, it also remains "ce mal de," the fragment, the emblem of the inability to fully articulate thought, feeling, condition, circumstances. In this sense, it is linked with the un-nameable situation "CECI" of "Notes sur le non-poème et le poème" to which I will turn in a moment.

Part II: Poetry's Insurrection

*hommes
il faut tuer la mort qui sur nous s'abat
et ceci s'appelle l'insurrection de la poésie⁷¹*

-Gaston Miron, "Demain, l'histoire"

4.2.1—"Aliénation délirante"

"Aliénation délirante" and "Notes sur le non-poème et le poème" have a special status in *L'homme rapaillé*. Miron placed them at times with his essays and at times with his verse, confirming the fact that their hybrid form defies a clear separation between poetry and prose. These essay-poems enact the problem of language in Québec society as a whole, the difficulties this creates for a writer and above all the poet, and at the same time stage the beginning of a "post-colonial" future. In these writings, poetic language becomes more than just a victim of outside circumstances. It is also the space where language can liberate itself from the restrictions and "perversions" present in the social context, where it can enrich itself and re-infuse common language with creativity and agency, where subjects "dispossessed" of their language can "repossess" their instrument of culture and contribute to its natural evolution.

The question of the politics of language is taken up explicitly in "Aliénation délirante." Here, in a stream of consciousness prose-poem, Miron explores the articulation between self and society through an almost sociolinguistic perspective and with some of his only explicit references to institutional politics. This text also functions through somatization, describing

⁷¹ "men/ we must kill the death pouring down on us/ and this is called poetry's insurrection."

the devastating progression of sociopolitical alienation through the extended metaphor of a physical and mental illness of the speaking subject (“une maladie naguère bénigne,” “une démangeaison,” “abcès,” “ton moignon raccourci,” “tu deviens un monceau de tics un paquet traumatisé,” etc.) (“an illness once benign,” “an itching,” “abscess,” “your shortened stump,” “you are becoming an aggregate of tics a traumatized lump”).

There is a striking similarity of scope, and even form, between “Aliénation délirante” and Fanon's “L'expérience vécue du Noir.” In both texts, quotes punctuate a colloquial internal monologue, that of an “I” who openly represents the alienation of a community and sketches a critical “prise de conscience” of that alienation. Miron's text constitutes a twofold critique of present circumstances that eat away at an individual's ability to affirm himself. First it condemns the overall deterioration of the French language in Québec and second it denounces the mystifying universalism that covers up local domination.

The first lines of the poem are a series of linguistically mixed phrases, syntactically French with substitutions of English words: “*Y est-y flush lui... c'est un blood man... watch out à mon seat cover... c'est un testament de bon deal...*” The repeated ellipses indicate the possibility of an infinite multiplication. These quotes of everyday speech are then interrupted by long interjections of stream of consciousness narration:

voici me voici l'unilingue sous-bilingue voilà comment tout
commence à se mêler à s'embrouiller c'est l'écheveau
inextricable

*Je m'en vas à la grocerie... pitche-moi la balle... toé scram
d'icitte... y t'en runne un coup...*

English gets mixed into French just as the poetic commentary becomes entangled (or encumbered) with the quotes gathered from the external world. Like a “disease,” like a “cancer,” these phrases which might have seemed amusing or “benign” at the beginning of the poem spread, incrusting themselves into the textual body, as they already have in the social one. By the conclusion of the essay-poem they have become “unilingual” phrases, entirely in French or in English. They are unilingual only in appearance, however. The English phrases merely designate a variety of slogans, businesses or financial institutions (“*City & District Savings Bank... Shoe Fox...*”). Meanwhile the French ones, such as “*ne dépassez pas quand arrêté*” [don’t pass when stopped] or “*saveur sans aucun doute*” [flavor without a doubt] indicate that what were initially mere lexical substitutions have given way to what Miron calls syntactic “perversion.” These phrases, often translations of English idiomatic expressions, have become signs of the decay and impending loss of the French idiom in Québec.

In an essay taking the form of an auto-interview, entitled “*Décoloniser la langue*,” Miron explains that such phrases no longer make sense in French without juxtaposition with English. He writes that this type of phrase exemplifies “la communication de l’autre dans nos signes; la langue de l’autre informe notre langue de ses calques [...] c’est de l’anglais en français” (“the communication of the other through our signs; the language of the other informs our language with its calques [...] it is English in French”; *L’homme*

rapaillé 213). The poet thus explicitly denounces the degradation of French in Québec, which he argues is the product of the system of an omnipresent translation fostered by Canadian "bilingualism." This bilingualism is in fact unidirectional, due to the exclusive commercial, cultural and political dominance of an English-speaking minority. For Miron, then, the devalorization of French and its resulting deterioration are founded on a colonial-type diglossia akin to Albert Memmi's descriptions in *Portrait du colonisé*. Memmi writes that "muni de sa seule langue, le colonisé est un étranger dans son propre pays. [...] Dans le contexte colonial, le bilinguisme est nécessaire. Il est condition de toute communication, de toute culture et de tout progrès" ("armed only with his language, the colonized is a stranger in his own country. [...] Within the colonial context, bilingualism is necessary. It is required for any communication, any culture and progress"; 124). Miron's "Décoloniser la langue" comes close to paraphrasing this view when the poet claims that "la notion même de culture est assimilée au fait de savoir la langue de l'autre pour accéder aux valeurs dominantes" ("the very notion of culture is assimilated to knowing the other's language in order to access the dominant values"; *L'homme rapaillé* 210). Both Memmi and Miron describe situations in which a mother tongue becomes a domestic language and a language of translation. Politics, culture, history – everything happens largely in the other language and to the other language, while the mother tongue becomes stagnant and begins to decay. Both authors explain that this has the effect of making one feel permanently foreign. In another passage of "Décoloniser la

langue,” Miron describes how he became aware of the way one internalizes a feeling of being on the outside in such a system:

Un jour, j’ai ressenti un étrange malaise, presque schizophrénique. Je ne savais plus dans ce bilinguisme instantané, colonial, reconnaître mes signes, reconnaître que ce n’était plus du français. Cette coupure, ce fait de devenir étranger à sa propre langue, sans s’en apercevoir, c’est une forme d’aliénation (linguistique) qui reflète et renvoie à une aliénation plus globale qui est le fait de l’homme canadien-français, puis québécois, dans sa société, par rapport à sa culture et à l’exercice de ses pouvoirs politiques et économiques. (*L’homme rapaillé* 208)

One day, I felt such a strange faintness, almost schizophrenic. In this instantaneous colonial bilingualism, I could no longer recognize my signs, recognize that it was no longer French. This break, becoming a stranger to one’s own language, without realizing it, is a form of (linguistic) alienation which reflects and refers to a more global alienation, which a fact of life for the French-Canadian man, then the Quebecker, in his society, with respect to his culture and the exercise of his political and economic powers.

Forced into being both self and other, in a way that extends beyond any otherness that might be an intrinsic part of the human condition, the subject tends towards schizophrenia. It also tends towards a certain passivity. Estranged from one’s language, one becomes estranged from a society’s development. Here, through the question of linguistic alienation, we find ourselves in the realm of a Marxist critique.

The “schizophrenic,” “unilingual sub-bilingual” subject is simultaneously affected by the progressive commercialization of his being. Returning to “Aliénation délirante,” we can remark that the phrases Miron quotes are most often tied to business and consumerism: “bon deal,” “Je m’en va à la grocérie,” “pharmacie à prix coupés,” “Nous vous remercions de votre

patronage,” etc. Unaware of his illness, the alienated individual becomes “l’homme du langage pavlovien les réflexes bien conditionnés, bien huilés” (“the man of pavlovian language with well-conditioned, well-oiled reflexes”). The subject’s role is gradually reduced to a quasi-mechanical one. He increasingly responds to the environment through unconscious obedience to slogans and ready-made phrases as though to commands. Without realizing it, he is displaced towards a passive existence, outside of history and outside of time (Memmi 111,122), becoming little more than a machine-for-production-and-consumption, “plus qu’une fonction digestive à l’échelle de [sa] vie” (“no more than a digestive function on the scale of [his] life”).

Seeking to escape from these internal and external conflicts, the subject might turn to the security offered by notions of the Universal, of Human Rights, and of Humanity. This is the next step in the poetic subject's journey toward a new consciousness of the self. And, for Miron, it is a false step, since claiming “l’univers t’appartient tu es fils de l’universel” can easily become another form of alienation: “tu t’affirmes universel en te niant” (“the universe belongs to you you are a son of the universal”; “you affirm yourself universal while denying yourself”). Like Fanon, Miron insists on the importance of maintaining a certain specificity of identity. We can recall that Fanon vehemently critiques Sartre for paternalistically relativizing Negritude. Fanon writes that, despite its limitations, “j’avais besoin de me perdre dans la négritude absolument” (“I needed to lose myself completely in *négritude*”; 109). The racist ideologies that Negritude sought to confront do not disappear

with an intellectual passage into universal Marxism. For Fanon, it is thus important to also valorize this "weak" element of the dialectic and "à travers un particulier humain, tendre vers l'universel" ("through a human particular, reach for the universal"; 160).

Miron rejects a certain kind of recourse to universalism for a second reason, suggesting that it can lead to disengagement and passivity. He is particularly critical of the kind of art that emerges under this mystified state where, in the midst of social and political domination, "tu vois pour ton compte se lever les couchers de soleil de la beauté et les oiseaux et les fleurs faire cui-cui et belles hampes avec corolle a cinq rangées dans tes vers" ("on your part you see the sunsets of beauty rising and the birds going chirp-chirp and the beautiful stems with five-rowed corollas in your verses"). This is likely a comment directed at some of Miron's contemporaries and at the art for art's sake ideology in general, but perhaps also a reappraisal of some of his own earlier poems, such as "Corolle ô fleur," a pastiche of Mallarmé, to which he seems to be alluding. As we saw earlier, Miron viewed some of his early verse, and occasionally poetry as a whole, as a form of fraud and flight.⁷² Meanwhile, those who "font l'histoire à l'étage supérieur" ("make history on the top floor") go about their business in every corner of the world:

Tu entends un nommé Dean Rusk demander aux peuples libres

⁷² We can recall from the discussion of "Sur la place publique" in Chapter 2, that Miron had publicly announced his turn to a poetry of political engagement during *La Nuit de la poésie*.

Mes camarades au long cours de ma jeunesse
si je fus le haut lieu de mon poème, maintenant
je suis sur la place publique avec les miens
et mon poème a pris le mors obscur de nos combats

qui croient en cette même Personne et en ses Droits inaliénables de resserrer le blocus autour de Cuba “économiquement, politiquement et spirituellement” [...] et tu lis dans ton journal qu’un avion vietnamien sur le conseil des civilisés a rasé au napalm un village de ce pays repaire de vermine et qu’il n’est pas resté de survivants et toi tu en conclus que ces gens-là ne font pas partie de l’Humanité et qu’ils n’ont pas de Personne Humaine et toi tu en viens quelque part dans ta pensée polluée de dualisme de langage depuis la formation de ton psychisme premier à te demander si c’est bien de la même Personne Humaine que se réclament les spécialistes de l’usage de chez nous et toi tu ne sais plus quoi penser ni qui tu es et si tu as une Personne Humaine et laquelle si c’est oui.

You hear a certain Dean Rusk ask the free peoples who believe in the same Person and its inalienable Rights to tighten the blockade around Cuba “economically, politically and spiritually” [...] and you read in your newspaper that a Vietnamese plane acting on advice from the civilized razed with napalm a village of this country which is a hideout for vermin and that there were no survivors and you conclude that these people are not part of Humanity and that they do not have a Human Person and you arrive at a point in your thought polluted by language dualism since the very formation of your primary psyche where you ask yourself if it is really the same Human Person that the specialists of usage among us align themselves with and you no longer know what to think nor who you are or if you have a Human Person and if so which one.

In this passage, Miron emphasizes the quasi-spiritual force of propaganda. The repetition, capitalized, of the “Human Person” transforms it into a new kind of deity. Dean Rusk and Cabot Lodge, some of the only people whose names are mentioned directly in the collection, become corresponding ministers, crusaders for a “Humanity” to be preserved at all costs. This is Miron’s third objection to a blind turn towards universalism. Certain uses of the concept can obviously coincide with and even justify the strategic dehumanization and massacre of others. All that is needed to manipulate public thought and advance hegemonic policies is the same old dualistic

rhetoric to create divisions and categories that distinguish between “ces gens-là” and “nous.” Miron’s text repeats “et toi” with a certain urgency, signaling the need for the subject to situate himself within this web of hypocrisy, and his inability to do so since he has renounced his means and lost the footing of a negotiated specificity of identity. He now finds himself “sans vraiment se posséder et se concevoir et pouvoir se vivre comme expérience connaissance spécificité identité destinée et universalité” (“not really being able to master himself and perceive himself and be able to live as experience knowledge specificity identity destiny and universality”).

Note that Miron does not reject the notion of the universal entirely, but that he draws attention to the way in which it can constitute a misleading way out of conflicts that remain completely unresolved on a local and global scale. Ultimately, then, “Aliénation délirante” presents the lure of universalism as a form of triple mystification. It can lead to turning away from ongoing national or minoritarian struggles that still require attention and intervention. Alternatively, it can become an empty symbol allowing one to rest easy and comfortably while turning away from political and social problems in general. And finally, it can become a façade that all too easily accommodates domination and oppression. Universalism, as opposed to a “universalité” that is in relation with “spécificité,”⁷³ risks leaving the subject where he started, merely adding another layer to his alienation.

We might wonder about the title of this essay-poem. Especially since,

⁷³ We can see that Miron’s thought at times also tends toward Édouard Glissant.

for Miron, alienation often already takes on the psychological meaning of mental illness, what does the term "delirious" add here? A first explanation is, I think, again related to the internalization of a sociopolitical condition. The doubling insists on the element of madness, almost to the point of redundancy, yet it also allows the term "alienation" to tend more toward its linguistic, social, economic and political dimensions. The subject's condition is not a genetic disorder, but rather an environmentally induced illness: "tu attrapes l'aliénation et tu n'en sortiras qu'à coup de torture des méninges." What we then see in the poem are various stages of this mental "torture," which manifests itself as a painful spatial and temporal circularity and disorientation.

le temps s'abolit (time is abolished)

il n'y a plus rien de repérable plus de points cardinaux tu
regardes le ciel et la terre à l'endroit et à l'envers et c'est tout
comme il n'y a plus ni forces centrifuges ni centripètes
(there's no longer any point of reference no more cardinal points
you watch the sky and the earth up right and upside down and
it's as though there were no more centrifugal and centripetal
forces)

tes bras frappent l'air comme ceux des moulins à vent
(your arms beat at the air like windmills)

tu te suicides sans mourir (you commit suicide without dying)

It is not only the confused state and unproductive movement of the subject that resemble the symptoms of delirium. The adjective "delirious" also frames the poetic narrative itself within the context of excessive, incoherent speech and hallucinatory perception. The stream of consciousness style, its absence of punctuation and disorderly connections between ideas, is particularly adequate for portraying and performing such madness. Most

importantly, there is a destabilizing pronominal slippage from the first to the second person. The internal monologue begins with “voici me voici” in the second paragraph, switching to “te voici” in the fourth and to the third person in one instance (“on se reveille”), then back to the first person in the sixth paragraph, and entirely to the second person from the seventh paragraph onward, concluding with “ô mon schizophrène dans le plus fantomatique des mondes.” This oscillation of the narrative voice adds another element of confusion and even further erodes the subjective coherence of the speaker, who evidently does not “coincide with himself” (Memmi 154).

Finally, we should note that the schizophrenic narrator also “hears voices” (“tu entends des voix”). In the context of the poem, this is as much another symptom of madness as it is a form of inspired understanding. In accepting his “délire,” the narrator nevertheless becomes more lucid than the average citizen (hidden behind the ambiguous “you”), and thus hears and sees his society’s language differently. “Aliénation délirante” thus becomes a display of the progressive linguistic dispossession of a community and of the process of becoming conscious of this situation. These political dimensions of the text are concretized in the poetic language, which further draws attention to itself through repeated uses of “voici” and “voilà.” The French version of this text also highlights the visual and phonetic links between *délire* (delirium) and *lire* (reading), as though the delirious monologue in fact re-reads or interprets the social text. Read in this way, the essay-poem’s fragments of narration stage a *demonstration* of “delirious alienation,” and begin to untangle and decode

the ready-made phrases that feed it. The narrator of “Aliénation délirante” thus provides an explanation of the societal text, and at the same time, through his very expression, be it delirious, attests to the possibility of resistance and moving beyond the present situation.

4.2.2 – “Notes sur le non-poème et le poème”

“Notes sur le non-poème et le poème” stages a similar struggle between speech and silence. As the title indicates, “Notes” is a series of fragments. These fragments alternate between prose and verse, with a visual connection provided by the capitalized word that is repeated throughout the essay-poem: “CECI.” The affirmation of a new speech launches the text.

Je parle seulement pour moi et quelques autres
puisque beaucoup de ceux qui ont parole
se déclarent satisfaits
VOYEZ LES MANCHETTES

I speak only for myself and a few others
since many of those who speak
declare themselves satisfied
SEE THE HEADLINES [also CUFFLINKS]

Various forms of “Je parle,” “Je dis” and “J’écris” then punctuate the work and numerous anaphoras reinforce the message that this is a speaking out, a breaking of silence. Implicitly this is an illegitimate speech, a speech on behalf of those whose speech does not count, whose words are not heard. The “manchettes” of the elites, those who can and do speak, are opposed to the silence of the “corps emmanché d’un mal de démanche” representing the common people (“Séquences”). “Notes” thus stages the emergence of silenced speech, its goal being to “dire et donner voix au muet” (“speak and give a voice to the silent”).

The speaker continues, “Je parle de CECI” (“I speak of THIS”). We are implicitly invited to decipher this demonstrative with no clear referent. Throughout the poem, it is qualified as “mon état d’infériorité collectif,” “ce

qui sépare,” “ma culture polluée, mon dualisme linguistique,” “absence,” “figé,” “un processus de dé-creation,” “un processus de dé-réalisation,” etc. (“my state of collective inferiority”; “that which separates”; “my polluted culture, my linguistic dualism”; “absence”; “fixed”; “a process of de-creation”; “a process of de-realization”). A few times it is equated with the phrase “le non-poème,” which hardly creates any clarity of meaning. “CECI” is opposed to “le poème,” “ici,” “genèse de présence,” “émergence,” “debout,” “souverain,” “présence.” “CECI” appears, then, to be a filler word for the effects of domination, while at the same time marking the fact that the circumstances remain, for the moment, unnamable. Miron writes “Comment dire l’aliénation, cette situation incommunicable?” (“How can one speak of alienation, that incommunicable situation?”). A neutral demonstrative pronoun, “CECI” is constructed by the text as a vague but powerful, politically charged word designating alienation in all the forms we have seen so far. It interpellates the reader, who is implicitly told *You know what I am speaking about. We don’t agree on a name for it yet, perhaps we don’t all recognize it, but a name isn’t necessary, because you know THIS, you feel THIS*. At the same time, “CECI” is reflexive – *this here* (this text I am writing and you are reading, here and now), partly a result of the larger CECI. Just as in “Aliénation délirante,” “CECI” refers to its own demonstration in the form of the text, the struggle between what Miron sees as the social reality of a linguistic poverty and the opening up of a new space for language, the fertile ground provided by the poem, which language to flourish.

“CECI” also marks the point of departure of an in-between moment. Within “CECI,” words become “méconnaissables” and history fades into emptiness: “Je ne me reconnais pas de passé récent. Mon nom est Amnésique Miron.” Such dispossession is the result of a corresponding possession, and it is the dominant group that holds the exclusive power to name: “Longtemps je n’ai su mon nom, et qui j’étais, que de l’extérieur. Mon nom est ‘Pea Soup.’ Mon nom est ‘Pepsi.’ [...] Mon nom est ‘Bastard.’ Mon nom est ‘cheap.’ Mon nom est ‘sheep.’ Mon nom... Mon nom...”⁷⁴ (“For a long time I only knew my name, who I was, from the outside. My name is ‘Pea Soup.’ My name is ‘Pepsi.’ [...] My name is ‘Bastard.’ My name is ‘cheap.’ My name is ‘sheep.’ My name... My name...”). This is one of the moments when the poem’s ambiguous temporality becomes most evident. The lines suggest that this moment of humiliation and domination, coded Anglophone, has now ended – it has become the recent past, and the speaker is now observing his alienated existence in “CECI” from a different moment.

“Notes” has been interpreted very literally as describing a clearly defined historical process. One could perhaps read it in this way. Segments such as “la mutilation présente de ma poésie, c’est ma réduction présente à l’explication. En CECI, je suis un poète empêché,” insist on the prosaic, didactic nature of the text. The repetition of “présente” here reminds us that we are looking at a concrete example of the deformation and limitations

⁷⁴ “Pea Soup and “Pepsi” are ethnic slurs commonly used against Francophones until after the Quiet Revolution.

imposed on poetry by “CECI.” Thus, François Dumont writes that “ce processus historique est clair: faisons d’abord la décolonisation, ensuite, une fois l’unité retrouvée, la poésie sera possible” (“this historical process is clear: let us first decolonize, then, once unity is regained, poetry will be possible”; 90).

Nevertheless, we must remember that “Notes” is also a poetic fiction. It is certainly a denunciation of a situation that eats away at creativity, but it is at the same time an act of creation. Yes, within “CECI,” poetry may be inhibited; however, Miron’s denunciation emanates partly through poetic language. In demonstrating or staging an “art pré-poétique,” Miron is already writing from another place and time, and the reader is reading from beyond as well – the present is already future as much as it is past: “le poème, ici, commence d’actualiser, commence d’être souverain.” And because of this “ici,” guaranteed by the poem, “CECI devient peu à peu postcolonial.” Dumont’s claim that, for Miron, “par sa nature, le poème échappe à l’action,” therefore does not seem tenable. The poem says and does contradictory things. Supposedly the poem cannot exist, cannot be written within “CECI,” and yet:

Il appartient au poème de prendre conscience de cette aliénation [...] L’affirmation de soi, dans la lutte du poème, est la réponse à la situation qui dissocie, qui sépare le dehors et le dedans. Le poème refait l’homme.

It is of the poem to take conscience of this alienation [...] In the poem’s fight, self-affirmation is the response to the dissociating situation that separates the outside and the inside. The poem puts man back together.

Miron thus declares that a certain *prise de conscience* and a certain self-

affirmation (divided perhaps), can only occur within the poem, and manage to escape the stifling forces they denounce.

“Notes” mimes the style of logical explanation; the text is punctuated by conjunctions such as “parce que” “puisque” “car” “ainsi” “en consequence de quoi” culminating in the hyperbolic “or donc par consequent par tous les joints de la raison qui me reste,” a line that in itself enacts the struggle of delirious alienation to grasp the subject’s situation analytically (“now so therefore by all the seams of the reason that I have left”). However, this didactic rhythm, this syntax and semantic field of logical argumentation, are doubled, precisely, by the work of the poem: the versification, the short, cut-off sentences, the metaphors and similes, the personification and dramatic apostrophes, the anaphoras – the interaction between these two registers forms not so much a progression as an omnipresent tension: “Le poème ne peut se faire que contre le non-poème/ Le poème ne peut se faire qu’en dehors du non-poème” (“The poem can only be made against the non-poem / The poem can only be made outside of the non-poem”). And as Pierre Nepveu aptly remarks, “dans” and “avec” become implicit corollaries. For Nepveu, Miron’s concluding couplet

est un refus de la poésie elle-même, l’exigence d’une impossible pureté. *L’Homme rapaillé* ne cesse au contraire de dire que le poème se fait *dans* le non-poème, *contre* sans doute, c’est-à-dire aussi *avec* lui. L’homme ne se rapaille qu’en s’éparpillant, il ne s’écrit que dans une absence momentanée. (123)

is a refusal of poetry itself, the requirement of an impossible purity. On the contrary, *L’Homme rapaillé* never stops saying that the poem forms *within* the non-poem, no doubt *against*, that is, also *with* it. Man does not gather himself together except by scattering himself, he writes himself only in a momentary absence.

“Notes,” then, is the demonstration of the poet’s struggle - we cannot privilege one side or the other, transparent didacticism or obscure verse. Miron shows that the tension between these terms can still have something to do with politics and action. As Nepveu explains, “le manque ou l’aliénation [...] mettent en branle le processus poétique, au moment même où il faut les dénoncer comme ce qui empêche l’exercice de toute parole, au moment où il faut accuser l’histoire de l’humiliante pauvreté d’être qu’elle a causée en nous” (“lack or alienation [...] set in motion the poetic process, at the very moment when they should be denounced for preventing the practice of any speech, at the moment when history should be accused for the humiliating poverty of being that it caused within us”; 139-140).

4.2.3 – “Séquences”

The title of *L'homme rapaillé*, beyond the meanings I sketched at the beginning of this chapter, might further also evoke *L'homme revolté*, especially given Miron's affinities with existentialism. Albert Camus's powerful work argues that revolt can be seen as the refusal of injustice, but necessarily in the name of a value higher than the self. It is this tension between negativity and positivity that constitutes Camus's concept of revolt and makes it an ethical and creative force tying the individual to the collective: “La liberté qu'il [le révolté] réclame, il la revendique pour tous; celle qu'il refuse, il l'interdit à tous. Il n'est pas seulement esclave contre maître, mais aussi homme contre le monde du maître et de l'esclave” (“The freedom that he [the rebel] claims, he claims for all; that which he refuses, he forbids all. He is not only slave against master, but also man against the world of master and slave”; 355). For Camus, the movement of refusal has as its immediate corollary the recognition of a collective situation, which is a positive element of the initial revolt that should be valorized and maintained in order to entirely escape the situation and logic of domination (rather than repeating through a mere individual reversal of power).

This double movement of refusal and affirmation is also at the root of Camus's constant interweaving of literary and social revolt, action and art. Art is also “ce mouvement qui exalte et nie en meme temps” and like art, revolt is “fabricatrice d'univers” (“this movement that exalts and denies at the same time”; “creator of universes”; 317). For Camus, this shared dynamic means that

“l’exigence de la révolte [...] est en partie une exigence esthétique” (“the demand of revolt [...] is partly an aesthetic demand”; 320). We have seen that Miron’s work does not content itself with the portrait of a singular, suffering “I,” but also often turns the social body into a mirror image (“pareil a moi”) of the self. Miron thus moves in the direction of a synthesis of the political and the aesthetic and turns his poetry into the kind of revolt that Camus describes.

With “Aliénation délirante” and “Notes sur le non-poème et le poème,” we began to look at a few of the ways in which resistance is figured in Miron’s work. We saw how the lyric portrait of an illness becomes steeped in didactic denunciation. Indeed, “Aliénation délirante” bears the parenthetical subtitle “(recours didactique),” marking the need for an accessible and interventionist poetry. But even though the causes of alienation are confronted explicitly, these poems cannot be assimilated with their essay counterparts “Décoloniser la langue” and “Un long chemin.” As we saw, they both achieve a poetic demonstration of the effects of linguistic conflict in Québec, and while showing an awareness of the sociopolitical dynamics of this situation and voicing the concerns of a community, they also performatively reaffirm poetic agency.

The progression from suffering to revolt and the exploration of political dimensions of poetry with respect to the subject and language are condensed in “Séquences.” This poem, appearing in the cycle *La batèche*, is crucial to understanding the links between poetics and politics in *L’homme rapaillé*. It provides the best example of what Miron might mean by “l’insurrection de la poésie.”

“Batèche” is a curse word formed from “baptême,” “baptism,” just like many other Québécois curse words that are in fact deformations of religious terms: *tabarnac*, *câlise*, *cré*, *crisse*, etc. In his annotated edition, Miron explains the circumstances leading up to his writing of the two poems in *La batèche* (“Le damned Canuck” and “Séquences”). He writes that one afternoon in 1953, he and some other poets were reading each other’s poetry in a tavern:

À un moment, je remarque que tous les habitués se sont rapprochés aux tables avoisinantes et écoutent d’un air éberlué. Même les serveurs qui en font autant ! Tout à coup l’un de ceux-ci nous apostrophe: “C’est pas ça, vous l’avez pas pantoute. C’est comme ça qu’on dit: “Crisse de câlisse de tabarnak d’ostie de saint-chrême...” En un éclair, je viens de saisir l’un des éléments rythmiques de notre parole populaire, celui du juron. Je cours chez moi et, dans un état d’exaltation, me mets à écrire dans cette veine et dans cet esprit. Un titre à ces premières ébauches ? J’emploie depuis longtemps l’expression “maudite batèche de vie” pour manifester tantôt ma misère ou ma révolte, tantôt ma tendresse ou ma compassion. (65)

At a certain moment I note that all the regulars come closer to the neighboring tables and listen with a flabbergasted appearance. Even the waiters! All of a sudden one of them shouts across to us: “It’s not like that, you don’t have it at all. It’s like this: *Crisse de câlisse de tabarnak d’ostie de saint-chrême...* In a flash, I just realized one of the rhythmic elements of our informal speech, that of the curse. I run home and, elated, I begin to write in this vein and in this spirit. A title for these first sketches? For a long time I have been using the expression *maudite batèche de vie* to express sometimes my misery or my revolt, sometimes my tenderness or my compassion.

In their own ways, both poems of *La batèche* are concerned with a poetics of cursing. “Le damned Canuck” is similar to Michèle Lalonde’s “Speak White,” in that it ironically takes up an invective and transforms it into the symbol of a wider social oppression, making visible the power dynamics behind its deployment as well as the sociopolitical conditions associated with

its use. The term “batèche,” however, is particularly important in “Séquences,” where it appears anaphorically in three refrain-like stanzas of cursing sequences interspersed among the poem’s five more lyrical stanzas.⁷⁵ Beyond inviting contemplation on the poetics of cursing (thoughtfully taken up by Filteau), “batèche” calls for a reflection on the violence of a response to those who oppress and on the creative act of naming and naming oneself.

“Séquences”⁷⁶

Parmi les hommes dépareillés de ces temps
je marche à grands coups de tête à fusée chercheuse
avec de pleins moulins de bras sémaphore
du vide de tambour dans les jambes
et le corps emmanché d'un mal de démanche
reçois-moi orphelin bel amour de quelqu'un
monde miroir de l'inconnu qui m'habite
je traverse des jours de miettes de pain
la nuit couleur de vin dans les caves
je traverse le cercle de l'ennui perroquet
dans la ville il fait les yeux des chiens malades

La batèche ma mère c'est notre vie de vie
batèche au cœur fier à tout rompre
batèche à la main inusable
batèche à la tête de braconnage dans nos montagnes
batèche de mon grand-père dans le noir analphabète
batèche de mon père rongé de veilles
batèche de moi dans mes yeux d'enfant

Les bulles du délire les couleurs débraillées
le mutisme des bêtes dans les nœuds du bois
du chiendent d'histoire depuis deux siècles
et me voici
sortant des craques des fentes des soupiraux
ma face de suaire quitte ses traits inertes
je me dresse dans l'appel d'une mémoire osseuse

⁷⁵ Miron’s formal experimentation in “Séquences” presents and intensifies the poetic and resistant forces in common speech. As Claude Filteau has argued, the poem forges a “langage de l’insurrection émanant du rapport populaire au sacré” (“isurrectional language emanating from the popular relationship with the sacred”; 157).

⁷⁶ See Appendix for translation.

j'ai mal à la mémoire car je n'ai pas de mémoire
dans la pâleur de vivre et la moire des neiges
je radote à l'envers je chambranle dans les portes
je fais peur avec ma voix les moignons de ma voix

Damned Canuck de damned Canuck de pea soup
sainte bénite de sainte bénite de batèche
sainte bénite de vie maganée de batèche
belle gregousse de vieille réguine de batèche

Suis-je ici
ou ailleurs ou autrefois dans mon village
je marche sur des étendues de pays voilés
m'écrit Olivier Marchand
alors que moi d'une brunante à l'autre
je farouche de bord en bord
je barouette et fardoche et barouche
je vais plus loin que loin que mon haleine
soudain j'apparaîs dans une rue au nom d'apôtre
je ne veux pas me laisser enfermer
dans les gagnages du poème, piégé fou raide

mais que le poème soit le chemin des hommes

et du peu qu'il nous reste d'être fiers
laissez-moi donner la main à l'homme de peine
et amironner

Les lointains soleils carillonneurs du Haut-Abitibi
s'éloignent emmêlés d'érosions
avec un ciel de ouananiche et de fin d'automne
ô loups des forêts de Grand-Remous
votre ronde pareille à ma folie
parmi les tendres bouleaux que la lune dénonce
dans la nuit semée de montagnes en éclats
de sol tracté d'éloignement
j'erre sous la pluie soudaine et qui voyage
la vie tiraillée qui grince dans les girouettes
homme croa-croa
toujours à renaître de ses clameurs découragées
sur cette maigre terre qui s'espace
les familles se désâment
et dans la douleur de nos dépossessions
temps bêcheur temps tellurique
j'en appelle aux arquebuses de l'aube
de toute ma force en bois debout

Cré bataclan des misères batèche
cré maudit raque de destine batèche
raque des amanchures des parlures et des sacrules
moi le raqué de partout batèche
nous les raqués de l'histoire batèche

Vous pouvez me bâillonner, m'enfermer
je crache sur votre argent en chien de fusil
sur vos polices et vos lois d'exception
je vous réponds non
je vous réponds, je recommence
je vous garroche mes volées de copeaux de haine
de désirs homicides
je vous magane, je vous use, je vous rends fous
je vous fais honte
vous ne m'aurez pas vous devrez m'abattre
avec ma tête de tocson, de nœud de bois, de souche
ma tête de semailles nouvelles
j'ai endurance, j'ai couenne et peau de babiche
mon grand sexe claque
je me désinvestis de vous, je vous échappe
les sommeils bougent, ma poitrine résonne

j'ai retrouvé l'avenir

Surprisingly, there are very few commentaries of “Séquences.” Only two really grasp at the details of the text, yet pulling it into very different directions. François Hébert has recently devoted a chapter to the poem in his *Miron l'égarouillé*. “Baptême, batèche” is an informal, often conversational reading, focusing mainly on the poem’s religious imagery and interpreting it as an expression of spiritual nostalgia for “le passé catholique de Montréal” (78). Claude Filteau, on the other hand, reads Miron’s work through the lens of Rancière’s partition of the sensible, coming close to turning “Séquences” into a

kind of “plagiat par anticipation” of *La Mésestente*.⁷⁷ He identifies a major political dimension of the text while also paying attention to some of the details of the verse, mainly in light of Henri Meschonnic’s concept of rhythm. Meanwhile, most critics simply make a comment in passing regarding the verb “amironner,” or just quote it, taking its meaning more or less for granted. I will return to this hapax shortly to try to understand the force and the function Miron’s Verb.

From alienation and its somatization, to its political and linguistic causes, to the moment of revolt, to the return to the land and to a hope for the future – “Séquences” condenses all of the themes we’ve discussed throughout this chapter. The title invites a reflection on the structure of the poem, at once an ensemble of fragments forming a progression, as well as a succession of echoes of particular sounds or rhythms. “Séquences” is a poetic performance of a sudden shift from inertia to active movement, from silence to speech, from linguistic alienation to poetic agency. It responds to Fanon’s hope that the engaged intellectual’s goal might be to bring “l’homme à être *actionnel*” (180).

The poem stages a progression from images of chaotic, frustrated and

⁷⁷ In his *L’espace poétique de Gaston Miron*, Filteau provides a well-argued interpretation of “Le damned Canuck” and “Séquences” as depictions of the emergence of social consciousness and instances of political subjectification. For Filteau, these poems are manifestations of Rancière’s *litige* and inaugurate a new *partage du sensible* by making visible the divide between those whose speech does or does not count and by transforming the city into the space of an emerging community of speaking citizens (129-130). Importantly, however, the critic only uses Rancière’s theory of *politics*, but never mentions that, for Rancière, *literary dissensus* is in fact opposed to, and even “invalidates,” political subjectification (*Politique de la littérature* 54). My observation here, while indicating once again how elusive Rancière’s thought can be, does not necessarily detract from Filteau’s transposition of political dissensus on to the poetic text. On the contrary, the fact that Rancière’s description of politics can successfully complement a reading of “Séquences,” and numerous other poems, provides a clear counter-example to Rancière’s exclusion of literature from a dissensual politics which he reserves solely for the public sphere.

unproductive movement, to a directed, violent action. Filteau gives us an astute interpretation of the movement evoked in the poem's first stanza. The subject is caught in the repetition, Filteau writes,

d'une gesticulation impuissante, d'un combat contre les moulins à vent qui n'est pas sans rappeler le personnage de Don Quichotte de la Manche auquel Miron fait clairement allusion en évoquant les "moulins" de sa "démanche". La gesticulation du corps est en outre signifiante par sa tension à vouloir provoquer une levée quasi militaire des hommes "dépareillés". Mais cette posture de héros est aussitôt démythifiée par l'image de Don Quichotte et plus loin par toute une gestuelle désordonnée (141-142).

a powerless gesticulation, a fight against windmills reminiscent of Don Quixote to which Miron clearly alludes by evoking the "mills" of his "démanche." The body's gesticulation is furthermore significant because of tension, seeking to elicit a quasi-military surge of the "dépareillés." But this hero posture is immediately demystified by the image of Don Quixote and later by an entire set of disorderly gestures.

The latter appears in 3rd stanza ("je chambranle dans les portes") and again in the 5th stanza, with Miron's neologistic verbalization of a series of slang nouns (*farouche*, *barouette*, *fardoche*, *barouche*), echoing the popular deformation of "batèche" and the final neologism of the sequence, the verb "amironner." The meanings of these specifically Québécois words all contribute to evoking a kind of back and forth movement or transportation, just as the sound alternates between far- and bar-. They accompany the concrete and biographical displacement observed by Filteau to the "ville aliénée aliénante où s'installe le poète après avoir abandonné les paysages de son village natal," an interpretation permitted largely by the 2nd and 6th stanzas ("alienated, alienating city where the poet settles in after abandoning

the landscapes of his native village”; 140). The doubling of “far-” is echoed in the triple appearance of “loin” in the following two lines, and then again in the first three lines of the following stanza (lointains, éloignent, éloignement). Combined with “bar-” and “bord,” these sounds intensify the images of estrangement and confinement with which the poem began (“hommes depareillés,” “orphelin”). The poet “marche,” “traverse,” and “erre,” he “farouche,” “barouette,” “fardoche,” and “barouche,” in a desperate attempt to clear a path for an escape from his feelings of enclosure and to overcome the maddening distance separating him from others and from the land.

There is a shift, however, from this frustrated movement, which is analogous to the sequences of curses, to an active movement aiming to give rise to a resistant community. It begins with a quasi-religious resuscitation of the subject in the 3rd stanza, marked by the affirmation “me voici.” In lines that evoke Césaire’s *Cahier* (an important intertext for the entire poem), the subject reawakens: “ma face de suaire quitte ses traits inertes/ je me dresse dans l’appel d’une mémoire osseuse”. Later, he exclaims “j’en appelle aux arquebuses de l’aube/ de toute ma force en bois debout,” offering a Northern echo of “bois d’ébène” and once again insisting on a posture of resistance that extends even into the landscape. We should recall the importance of this word, “debout,” in Césaire’s poem. It appears after numerous repetitions of “au bout du petit matin...” in sequences describing “les Anitlles qui ont faim” and “cette ville inerte” (implicitly “au bout des forces”). Césaire then writes “nous sommes debout maintenant, mon pays et moi” and, near the conclusion of the

Cahier, repeats the word several times, even setting it apart typographically from the rest of the poem:

debout
et
libre

standing
and
free

The final stanza of “Séquences” presents an entirely different movement from the one we saw earlier in the poem, this time directed against a “vous” characterized only by money, police, and laws (and specifically laws that suspend the rule of law).⁷⁸ Miron’s audience being Francophone, this “vous” in “Séquences” is significant, especially given that the poem makes no mention of linguistic conflict. It escapes a simplistic cultural correlation with power, and rather attacks that power and its abuses directly. The series of transitive verbs expressing the movement of this last stanza narrate a resistant violence that is at once physical, verbal and symbolic. Furthermore, the use of the present tense emphasizes the subject’s attempt to poetically perform a liberating gesture, moving beyond the deferred and uncertain action of a threat.

I mentioned that the unproductive movement depicted in the poem is analogous to the cursing sequences. “Séquences” tends to associate movement and speech, staging a parallel progression from silence, from “le noir

⁷⁸ The refusal opening this stanza is of course reminiscent of Césaire’s famous dismissal: “Va-t-en, lui disais-je, gueule de flic, gueule de vache, va-t-en je déteste les larbins de l’ordre et les hannetons de l’espérance” (“Get lost, I told him, cop face, cattle face, get lost I hat the flunkies of order and the cockchafers of hope”). Also, in its affirmation of a telluric and (re)generative virility, an appropriation of “terre grand sexe levé vers le soleil,” the finale of this stanza once again seems to pay homage to Césaire (“land great sex lifted towards the sun”).

analphabète” and “le mutisme des bêtes,” to a speaking out in refusal: “je vous réponds non.” In the first stanza, Miron writes “je traverse le cercle de l’ennui perroquet,” a line incorporating the endless circularity of daily life,⁷⁹ into the image of unproductive speech. The text echoes Césaire here, who begins the *Cahier* with descriptions of a speech that is the equivalent of silence, “inutile comme des cries de perroquets babillards” and “si étrangement bavarde et muette” (“useless like the cries of babbling parrots”). In a later interview, Miron reuses the parrot metaphor, again linking it to circularity. He explains:

C’est parce que rien n’a été réglé pour de bon que la réalité se reproduit circulairement et qu’elle radote et que nous radotons depuis deux cents ans. Le cercle du perroquet ! Nous sommes tous des perroquets historiques et en ce moment je suis un oiseau de cet acabit. Je perroquette à mon tour sans rien changer. (Royer 140)

It is because nothing has been settled for good that reality is reproduced circularly and that it rambles and that we have been rambling for two hundred years. The parrot’s circle! We are all historical parrots and now I am a bird of this kind. I parrot in turn without changing anything.

For Miron, circularity and “parroting” are the results (and causes) of stagnant policy and sociopolitical discourse, the equivalents of repetitive, nonsensical noise that “poetry’s insurrection” must overcome. In the 3rd stanza, Miron again associates movement and speech in the forms of babbling and staggering: “je radote à l’envers je chambranle dans les portes/je fais peur avec ma voix les moignons de ma voix.” Here we have yet another example of somatization, as the position of dispossession and lack of the speaker and the powerlessness of his speech are figured as an amputation.

⁷⁹ See “Petite suite en lest.”

These “moignons de ma voix” could also describe the curses themselves, not really addressed to anyone and having no clear denotations. Through the poetic form, however, these fragments of marginal or limit speech not only take on a poetic dignity, but also a new meaning emerging from the noise. They become the expression of revolt, the “copeaux de haine” launched towards the “vous” and the upright voice of a community brought forth and held together by the poem. Filteau explains Miron’s poetics of cursing in “La batèche” as a source of solidarity. As a “rite d’accueil et d’appartenance” the cursing “cimente la communauté des hommes” (“rite of welcoming and belonging”; “cements the human community”; 129). Furthermore, the critic argues that the cursing sequences are both an “affirmation de la vie dans le quotidien” and “formes de conscience passive qu’il faut réactiver et transformer en révolte déclarée” (“affirmation of daily life” and “forms of passive consciousness that must be reactivated and turned into open revolt”; 157, 132). The valorization of “notre parole populaire” is thus ambivalent. Miron turns toward cursing and toward the popular idiom in order to reactivate and re-mobilize them, to give a political inflection to what he viewed as increasingly alienated and passive forms of expression (“raque des amanchures des parlures et des sacrures”).

Even beyond the curse words, it is striking to what extent Miron turns to the local idiom for inspiration in “Séquences.” Yannick Gasquy-Resch provides a partial glossary of Québécois terms at the end of her introduction to Miron, and half of the words in this list arise just from this one poem.

Chambranler, brunante, barouetter, fardoche, garrocher, maganer, peau de babiche... such popular, sometimes rural terms are not simply artificially sprinkled into the text, but rather form an essential part of the poem's tone and dynamic. Miron also makes some of the only explicit geographical references in the entire collection in "Séquences." He mentions Haut-Abitibi and Grand-Remous—the names perhaps chosen to suggest a far-away grandeur—rural and forested areas whose flora and fauna contrast with the urban void and misery. While thus anchored geographically and in the popular tongue, the poem also contains the highest density of neologisms in the entire collection.

The most memorable of these is, of course, the verb "amironner," a parasynthetic formation based on Miron's name. To my knowledge, only three interpretations of this verb exist in the critical literature: an implicit explanation by Nepveu in his preface to the collection, and the glosses provided by Hébert and Filteau in their commentaries of the poem. I quote the relevant passages here for reference.

Nepveu:

[...] manquer à son propre inexistence, écrire que l'on n'est rien et par là devenir quelqu'un, acquérir un nom. Comment ne pas penser à la séquence de "La batèche" qui se termine par ce beau néologisme: "amironner." À force de ne pas écrire, le poète de *l'Homme rapaillé* en vient ainsi à faire le voyage le plus fou, le plus "abracadabrant": au tréfonds de son néant, il écrit et parle "de plus loin que moi" et devient par là plus que "moi," une pure présence entêtée, un œil ouvert sur le vide, un nom qui scintille dans la grande noirceur. (*L'homme rapaillé* 11-12)

[...] being absent to one's own inexistence, writing that one is nothing and thereby becoming someone, acquiring a name. How can we not think of the sequence from "*La batèche*," which ends

with that beautiful neologism: "*amironner*." Through not writing, the poet of *l'Homme rapaillé* embarks on the most deranged trip, the most "*abracadabrant*": in the depths of nothingness, he writes and speaks "farther than me" and thereby becomes more than "me," a pure presence stubborn, open the empty eye, a name that sparkles in the great darkness.

Filteau:

Dans ce contexte, "amironner" peut s'entendre comme "tendre la main à l'ami" ou comme un calque d'"avironner", par allusion peut-être à la *Chasse-galerie* qui illustre la couverture de l'édition Maspéro en 1981. Or cette légende n'est pas non plus sans rapport avec la poétique du "juron". Le poète apparaît finalement comme ce passeur qui "amironne" (on ne saurait mieux dire le combat livré avec soi-même), en donnant la main à l'homme de peine pour ériger la communauté dans son légendaire. (149)

In this context, "*amironner*" can be understood as "to reach out to a friend" or as based on "avironner" [to row, paddle], perhaps alluding to the *Chasse-galerie* that illustrated the front cover of the Maspéro edition in 1981. Now, this legend is not unrelated to the poetics of cursing. The poet ultimately appears as a guide who "*amironne*" (there is no better way to describe the struggle led against oneself), giving a hand to the working man to erect the community in its imaginary.

Hébert:

Ce geste en l'air ["avec de plein moulin de bras sémaphore"] deviendra, dans une métaphore complémentaire, le geste de ramer, d'avironner que l'on devine sous le néologisme "amironner", de ramer donc pour aller à quelqu'un, geste qui suppose, si je puis dire, l'immersion du bras dans l'amitié, comme l'aviron plonge pour faire avancer la barque. C'est le sens d'"amironner", outre que c'est aussi le nom de Miron, verbalisé. C'est serrer la main de son frère. Comme on se salue durant la messe... L'amitié est ainsi une sorte de baptême, selon Miron, avec la prophétie. (58)

This gesture in the air ["with full-out mill- semaphore arms"] will become, in a complementary metaphor, the gesture of rowing, *avironner*, which we can guess underlies the neologism "*amironner*," rowing so as to go toward someone, a gesture that implies, if I may say, the immersion of the arm in friendship, like the paddle plunges to move the boat forward. This is the meaning of "amironner", besides the fact that it is also Miron's

name, verbalized. It is a brotherly handshake. Like a greeting at Mass... Friendship is thus a kind of baptism, according to Miron, along with prophecy.

Dans le fait d'amironner, on aura noté le principal, le geste, celui de donner la main à l'autre, à son prochain, peinant ou en peine [...] Amironner, c'est en somme Miron allant à Miron, à soi et à l'ami, à l'homme en soi autant qu'à l'autre, son prochain, son intime, même éloigné. (85-86)

In the event of *amironner*, we will note the most important thing, the gesture of giving a hand to the other, one's neighbor, struggling or in pain [...] *Amironner* is in short Miron going to Miron, to himself and to the friend, to man himself as much as the other, his neighbor, his intimate even if distant friend.

From these commentaries, we can extract three dimensions of the verb “amironner,” revealed through its relations to its paronyms “amidonner” and “avironner.” In Nepveu’s reading, “amironner” seems to designate the naming of the poetic process that allows the subject to exert an agency where he would otherwise sink into complete powerlessness. Writing about his alienation and dispossession, the subject can be reborn (and re-baptized) even from the brink of death, refusing to be the object of the circumstances that seek to render him passive to his fate. Nepveu does not look into the context of the word, however. The line “et amironner” necessarily links the verb to the previous line, “laissez-moi donner la main à l'homme de peine.” Rather than being centered on the self, then, the poem’s structure emphasizes the “ami-” in “amironner,” as well as the rhyme with “donner,” a fact to which both Filteau and Hébert are sensitive. Indeed, just a few lines earlier, the speaker declares “je ne veux pas me laisser enfermer/dans les gagnages du poème, piégé fou raide/mais que le poème soit le chemin des hommes.” Miron thus infuses his poetry with the

task of being a link to others, rather than a self-enclosed space, which, however beautiful or successful, would still leave him feeling trapped and alienated. Like a guiding path or an outstretched hand, Miron offers the reader a poetry of revolt, recognizing and naming the sources of alienation, imagining a personal and collective refusal of the circumstances that maintain it, and affirming the past and hopeful future of a community. A poetry that allows the subject to progress from passivity (“me laisser enfermer”) to action (“laissez-moi”). A poetry that can be a form of communion, like the poet’s bread and wine from the first stanza.

Finally, let’s not forget the larger poetic context. As Riffaterre points out in his article “Poétique du néologisme,” a neologism’s “singularité même n’est pas due à son isolement, mais au contraire à la rigueur des séquences sémantiques et morphologiques dont il est l’aboutissement ou l’interférence” (“singularity is not due to its isolation, but on the contrary to the precision of the semantic and morphological sequences that it results from or interferes with”; 62). Suddenly, Miron appears (“soudain j’apparais”) again in a new way, haunting the poem just as he appears extraordinarily in the space of the city (“sortant des craques des fentes des soupiraux”). He appears here and there, in the alliteration in “m” of the first stanza, and its continuation into the 3rd; in the incompleteness of the repeated “mi”; in the proliferation of the subject beyond through the echoing of “ma,” “mon,” “moi,” (*marche, sémaphore, monde, montagnes, mémoire, moire*, etc.).

The text itself is *amironné*. By signing this hapax which emerges from

the text as a whole, Gaston Miron turns it into a sign of poetic revolt that condenses his thought of poetic experience and political engagement. He names the imperative act of creating poetry within and against the circumstances that silence and destroy it along with the silencing of the political subject. Thus, in the complex network of *L'homme rapaillé*, this word becomes a culminating point where the interlaced tensions between poetic language and linguistic alienation, madness and sanity, illness and healing, community and individual, dispossession and revolt are joined towards a possible emancipation.

CONCLUSION

In this dissertation, I have argued that an important branch of literary theory and criticism concerned with the relationships between the aesthetic and the political continues to endorse the idea of a fundamental incompatibility between these spheres. What I have called the *consensus of incompatibility* is the result of prescriptive definitions of both poetry and politics that restrict poetry to an absolutely individual and non-communicative ideal and politics to its institutional or organizational manifestations. This antithetical setup has its roots in the sacralization of poetry (and art) that began with Romanticism and continues today partly due to a tradition of exclusion of postcolonial literature and thought. By focusing on Francophone poetic works that engage explicitly with political discourses, I have highlighted the fact that fixing poetry into an apolitical or antisocial position imposes an abstract essence on works that always elude it. I have shown that autonomy and autotelism are only partial perspectives that do not account for the numerous ways poetic language can act politically.

Rather than pointing towards a politics of poetry, my readings aimed to show a variety of illocutionary and perlocutionary political dimensions that each work negotiates at the moment of production and of reception, while also being entangled in the larger historical scale. Unlike Adorno's and Rancière's claims that authentic literature turns away from affirmation or from political subjectification, I emphasized the formation of poetico-political subjects:

Lalonde's assertion, in English, that "we are not alone"; Depestre's and Miron's "me voici"; Césaire's invitation, "marronnons-les." These poems' individual, communitarian and universal affirmations point to and counter experiences of silencing, symbolic violence and exclusion from political life and historical being. Poetic language that engages critically with the political constitutes a crucial part of resistant thought under oppressive social systems, and, ultimately, in any society.

This dissertation dealt mainly with gestures toward the liberation of subjects, communities and language; however, as I pointed out, particularly through my readings of Depestre, I do not view the poetic genre, specific authors or even individual works as inherently or exclusively progressive. Césaire's epistolary poem implicitly asks Depestre (and his readership) to leave behind the poetic prescriptions of the Revolution only to issue another imperative: *bats-nous le bon tam-tam*. And even the very same words—for example, Raoul Duguay's "Que la vie et la poésie soient la même sacrée affaire sacrée"—can criticize the capitalist disenchantment of life, express a commitment within and on behalf of the mother tongue, declare a faith in the salutary power of collective creativity, call for an unrestrained individuality, contribute to a sentiment of nationalist cohesion, support a humanist vision of universal empowerment, participate in hippie cultural convention, etc. The indeterminacy of poetic language does not invalidate any of these interpretations. Duguay's speech act has meaning on its own, but also within the context of his poem, his performance, the Quiet Revolution, postcolonial

discourse and a certain aesthetic historicity. We can maintain the line's suspension of meaning while acknowledging its interwoven sociopolitical layers and that fact that it cannot intrinsically and exclusively be either for or against the status quo. Depending on the specific work and context, poetry can thus (often simultaneously) oppose attitudes and policies, partake in censorship, endorse ideology, open horizons of speech, thought, imagination and feeling, or promote social discipline.

Much of what I have discussed in these chapters is also applicable to other arts and in particular to the contemporary debate regarding the "fate" of the humanities. Arguments for the value of the humanities often take the form of a defense of the gratuitous in the face of capitalist logic and are intertwined with continuing discussions regarding a supposed incompatibility between aesthetics and the sociopolitical. This position developed largely against simplistic defenses of the humanities turning them into unique sources of moral or ontological truths in today's uninspiring society. However, both positions are reductive and constitute the newest extension of the "speculative theory of Art," which I outlined in the Introduction. At a time when the relevance of the humanities, and of languages and literature in particular, is in question in a very concrete way, rethinking the relationships between aesthetics and politics in directions that go beyond the assumptions of both engagement and art for art's sake remains an urgent task.

A natural further question is whether poetry's impact or effect in the world can be evaluated in some way. Certainly, we cannot generally quantify

impact; however, some of the connections I have explored in this dissertation could be examined further through vastly interdisciplinary studies. For example, Nussbaum's claims about the connection between reading novels and the development of empathy and moral reasoning skills would benefit tremendously from scientific studies. Surveys and neuroimaging can help us understand how separate poetic elements (sound, rhythm, rhetorical figures, themes) affect specific psychological and behavioral factors such as empathy, both immediately and in the long term. Such research could further enrich a multidimensional analysis of the politics of poetry.

APPENDIX

“Sequences”⁸⁰

Among the unparalleled men of these times
I walk with a homing rocket head rush
with full-out mill-semaphore arms
from the drum void in my legs
and my body joined by an ache that disjoints
receive me orphan beautiful love of someone
mirror world of the unknown inhabiting me
I traverse bread-crumbs days
the wine-colored night in cellars
I traverse the circle of parrot boredom
in the city it's ailing dog eyes

The blessed my mother it's our life of life
blessed with a rip-roar proud heart
blessed with the everlasting hand
blessed with the poaching head in our mountains
blessed of my grandfather in illiterate darkness
blessed of my father gnawed by sleepless nights
blessed of myself in my child-like eyes

The blisters of delirium the disarrayed colors
the beasts' muteness in the wooden knot
from history's weeds for two centuries
and here I am
emerging from cracks and fissures and basement grates
my shroud face abandons its inert features
I stand in the call of a bony memory
in the pallor of life and the moire of snow
I ramble inside out and tremble in doorways
I frighten with my voice the stumps of my voice

Damned Canuck of damned Canuck of pea soup
holy blessed of holy blessed blessing
holy blessed of ruined blessed life
gorgeous girl of blessed old wreck

⁸⁰ My translation, adapted from “Sequence of the Blessed,” *Counterpanes*, Guernica Editions Inc. and Dennis Egan.

Am I here
or elsewhere or in the past in my village
I walk stretches of veiled land
writes to me Olivier Marchand
as I from one twilight to the next
I grow fierce from one end to the other
I pull and load and carry
I go farther than far in my breath
suddenly I appear on a street with an apostle's name
I don't want to let myself be locked up
in the poem's earnings, trapped crazy stiff
but may the poem be the path of men
and from the little pride left to us
let me give a hand to the working man
and *amironner*⁸¹

The faraway ringing suns of Haut-Abitibi
draw away tangled with erosions
with a salmon and end of autumn sky
o wolves of the Grand-Remous forest
your rounds like my madness
among the tender birches denounced by the moon
in the night sprinkled with splintered mountains
of tractor-drawn distancing earth
I wander in the sudden voyaging rain
crow's-caw man
always reborn from his discouraged protests
on this meager spaced out earth
families working their souls out
and in the pain of our disposessions
mocking time telluric time
I call on dawn's arquebuses
with all my force of standing wood

Cursèd junk of blessèd miseries
Cursèd wretched waste of blessèd destiny
waste of rags and chatter and curses
I the broken from everywhere blessèd
We the broken of history blessèd

You can gag me, shut me away
curled up I spit on your money
on your police and your emergency laws
I answer you no

⁸¹ Untranslatable neologism, see discussion on p. 260.

I answer you, I begin again
I hurl shavings of hatred at you
of homicidal wishes
I ruin you, I wear you out, I make you go crazy
I shame you
You won't get me you'll have to slaughter me
with my stubborn cow's head, of wooden knot, pure
my head full of new sowings
I have endurance, I have rind and leather skin
my great sex flaps
I divest myself of you, I escape you
sleep moves, my chest resounds

I have rediscovered the future

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